

Innovation as a Topic for Media Reporting

Implications of Editorial Strategies and Framing

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In the German media system, there is no innovation journalism in terms of specialized media or specialized journalists, who deal with innovations as *innovations*. In several works on innovation journalism¹, innovations as a topic of media reporting are settled within other fields of journalism such as technology, politics or business. Furthermore, there are two basic patterns of reporting: a specific and a popular approach. Both aspects determine the manner, journalists deal with innovations as a matter of reporting. The paper suggests framing as a basic framework for the analysis of innovation reporting. This perspective focuses on crucial preconditions of journalist's work, drawn from the special area or reporting and influenced by activity of PR professionals and previous media coverage. The second part of the paper presents results of an explorative study on innovation journalism in Germany.

1 Preconditions of Journalistic Work

Journalists behave both in an active and passive way. On the one hand they are active in terms of selecting issues and events, putting them into a story and constructing news from it. On the other hand they are passive in terms of responding to given topics and using produced material e. g. PR. Organisational restrictions of time and money as well as task sharing influence the work of editors and reporters. Furthermore, factors outside the organisation form important prerequisites. Looking at the journalist's workflow there are conditions on the input- and output-side of editorial work. Journalists consider the input-side of news representing the supply of topics and events. And they take the output-side into account when anticipating demand for information and news. In this respect journalists have two basic guidelines for their work. First: what happened in a special area? And second: what is relevant for my specific audience? News content is restricted by both factors. Editorial strategies put the aspects together and predefine the basic arrangement of coverage. In doing so, news organisations and editors are dealing in different ways with the two questions. Even given the same publication period, some establish relevance for their audience in a very direct and obvious way, while others focus on facts and events.

¹ Nordfors, David: The Role of Journalism in Innovation Systems. In: Innovation Journalism, Vol. 1 (2004), No. 7, pp. 1-18 <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-1-7.pdf> ; Kaukhanen, Erkki: Innovation is much more than business and technology. In: Innovation Journalism, Vol. 2 (2005), No. 4, pp. 1-17. <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-2-4.pdf>

Certainly, journalists do not do their job autonomously. Instead, there are strong relationships in their work. Firstly, journalists refer closely to one another. Editors search for content in other media and access colleagues when researching stories. Thus, there are well introduced issues of reporting that are in place and can be updated. Secondly, journalists are not the only players in the game. PR professionals in companies and politicians also try to reach public attention to get their own messages heard. Journalists respond to these activities more or less passively. For example, they can accept the topic of a press release or even publish the given text.

The question how journalists deal with innovations and why they deal with them in a certain way refers to the circumstances and preconditions of journalistic work. The concept of framing provides a functional approach capturing these perspectives. Therefore, it is a promising theoretical framework for the analysis of innovation reporting. A common definition of framing goes back to Entman (1993): "To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral education and/or treatment recommendation"²

In this point of view, frames are not issues but background patterns of interpretation that structure the perception and evaluation of a specific issue. The three basic fields of journalism – politics, business and technology – can be seen as general frames that shape the way journalists deal with innovations as topics of reporting. They influence both the prominence which is given to innovations by the media outlet and the way innovations are presented and arranged in media coverage. These general frames are based on long time traditions and stable structures of journalism in our media systems.

This framework of analysis allows questions that can be systematically answered by research: What are these frames and what are they based on? Which are the conditions for certain topics for the common frames? Important are certain patterns of argumentation, ideas and ways of thinking concerning the commonly focussed topics such as government and opposition, the struggle for power in politics and financial consequences as well as the logic of money in economy.

Going beyond these basic questions, it can be investigated how journalists deal with special topics in their everyday business. Topics appear on the public agenda and then the relevant players provide them with evaluations and tendencies. Next to journalists, especially PR professionals play an important role in the battle for public attention. Therefore we have to focus on the manner how the different players succeed in drawing attention to their topics and then use this attention by exploiting it for their own aims.

² Entman, Robert M.: Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. In: Journal of Communication, Vol. 43 (1993), p. 52.

Innovation can be analysed as a cluster of topics. Political, economic and journalistic actors use the innovation topic in a different manner depending on their individual aims and intentions of communication. Thus, journalists do not work in an empty space when reporting on innovations. The topic is already communicated from a biased point of view. Which special motives do journalists have when they take up innovations as a subject of their reporting? And how do they handle it, when political and economic actors suggest certain topics?

2 Identifying Areas of Innovation Reporting

Today, each of the three areas – technology, business and politics – contains special patterns of argumentation, ideas and ways of thinking for journalists: they are framed. Journalism takes these characteristics into account when reporting on a special area.³ The characteristics are reflected in topics and special perspectives of reporting.

From the characteristics of these special fields of journalism, three, respectively four general frames that journalists apply to when reporting on innovations, can be derived:⁴

- science and technology progress (= the technical core of innovation)
- usability of innovations in terms of business administration and their consequences for the success of companies (= the management of innovations)
- economic-political conditions for innovations and their economic consequences (= the role of innovations in the national economy)
- the political debate on innovations and their societal framework (= the role of innovation in politics and society)

Beside the various fields journalism is specialized in, there is a second dimension that determines the work of journalists: the basic pattern of reporting. This pattern

³ Marcinkowski, Frank: Publizistik als autopoietisches System. Politik und Massenmedien. Eine systemtheoretische Analyse. Opladen (1993), p. 117.

⁴ In a further step we can link these general frames with universal guidelines in journalism drawn from the news value approach, for example, conflicts, impact, individual proximity, cultural and societal relevance, negativism, surprise or currency. News values are general patterns of selecting events and constructing news (Staab, Joachim Friedrich 1990; Schulz, Winfried 1982). As universal patterns they are consistently applied across all fields of journalism. For innovation reporting news values suggest how complex information can be made newsworthy and attractive for special audiences (Zerfass, Ansgar/Sandhu, Swaran/Huck, Simone 2005).

describes the way journalists construct news and stories by first selecting topics and secondly preparing them for specific audiences. In this regard two general patterns can be distinguished: a specific and a popular approach. The specific approach takes an inside perspective. Therefore, small audiences and professional contexts are in the focus of journalistic work. Journalists take their role first of all as a promoter of ideas. They want to deliver information and news to support processes within a special field. In contrast to the specific approach the popular approach holds an outside perspective. Assessing and discussing the general relevance of events is a key benefit of journalism that traces back to its historical roots. The outside perspective comes along with large audiences addressing people in everyday life roles. This perspective could apply to citizens, consumers, private investors or employees. In this field journalists understand themselves first of all as interpreters and translators, asking the question: what does news mean for specific contexts and situations?

When both dimensions are combined, the result is an analytical framework distinguishing various types of journalism in a two-way matrix (see figure). Each cell carries a special type of reporting, therefore handling innovations in a different way. There are *special groups of journalists* located in *special areas of media*. So we can try to discover and to describe these special characteristics in our media systems by empirical research. And we can examine the question how journalists in these special fields deal with innovations.

Figure: Areas of innovation reporting

		Special fields of journalism		
		Politics	Business	Technology
General pattern of reporting	Specific -Small audiences -Professional roles		Inside perspective Journalists as mediator and promoter	
	Popular -Large audiences -Everyday life roles	Outside perspective Journalists as translator and interpreter		

The general frames form important prerequisites for innovation reporting. Starting from them we have to take a further step and focus on the manner how innovations come up as a topic in the public discussion: Who are the involved participants and in which context do they use innovations as an issue of reporting? Within the given general frames, activities of journalists and PR professionals form specific issues on the public agenda. They determine the conditions and starting points for the journalists who want to report on innovations. If we want to describe single areas of innovation reporting along the suggested matrix, we have to consider both the work and the perception of journalists as well as the activities of political and economic players. Journalists and PR professionals have a complex and mutual relationship when they put innovations on the public agenda.

3 Results of an Explorative Study

Special fields of journalism shown in the matrix are the focus of research. Therefore results of an explorative study on innovation journalism in Germany are used.⁵ The study arranged two focus groups, one consisting of business and financial journalists and one consisting of PR professionals and communication experts of companies and agencies. The journalists work for news agencies, newspapers, TV-magazines and specialist journals. In general, it was an explorative approach only covering some aspects of the research area illustrated in the matrix.

The experts were asked to review the discussion on innovations in Germany: How do they perceive participants and arguments of the discussion in media, politics and economy? What about the prominence of the topic? How much is the audience interested in it? Furthermore, journalists and PR representatives should explain, how they deal with the topic of innovations in their work. How do journalists and PR experts consider their own role and the role of the opposite site?

3.1 Perception of the Public Debate Regarding Innovations

Those responsible for PR have generally perceived an appreciation of scientific and knowledge topics in recent years: “Suddenly, knowing something has again taken on a certain significance in society”, noted one participant. Knowledge magazines and quiz shows experienced a boom in the media and reached broad segments of the population. The subject of innovations also profited from this trend. Additionally politicians put the topic of innovations on the agenda and actively promote it. Those interviewed specifically cited the “Innovation Offensive” launched by the German Federal Government in 2004, as a significant contributor

⁵ Huck, Simone/Spachmann, Klaus: Innovationen als Gegenstand der Medienberichterstattung. Journalisten und PR-Fachleute im Gespräch. Hohenheim (2005).

to the topic's current popularity. A mere six years ago it would have been difficult to turn Germany as an innovation location into a "winning topic". This has recently changed completely.

Consensus exists regarding the innovative capability with respect to Germany's competitiveness in a globalized world economy. Against this background the current discussions, both among politicians and among the public, are critically perceived. The participants perceive an instrumentalization of the term "innovation" on the part of various players (politics, the media, the economy/PR). Thus, one PR specialist noted: "The whole discussion regarding innovation policy should be viewed very critically. In politics, the subject of innovation is currently being used to generate PR for the Federal Government and the Chancellor. There is no content at all."

As a result of the "Innovation offensive" on the part of political communications, the media have treated innovations as a "hype" topic. Simply due to the political debate alone, there is suddenly a significantly greater demand for subjects related to innovations. Even though those responsible for corporate communications are currently not treating the topic of innovations any differently than in the past, the chances of being noticed by the media have increased. This new openness on the part of journalists is evaluated as being basically positive. However, one participant critically posed the question of the media's independence. In addition, the quality of the reporting on topics related to innovation frequently leaves much to be desired.

Those responsible for PR also view the role of corporate communications critically in this regard. "Technology and innovation" is among the most frequently used phrases and, just as often, there is little substance. "Everyone wants to be innovative and be a technological leader without having to provide arguments and facts to support their claims", was the analysis provided by one participant. Communications experts recommend avoiding verbal shells such as "innovation" or "technology" entirely and, instead driving this message of dynamics and novelty home through a persuasive product or a credible story.

All the participants in the journalists' focus group agree that innovations are a significant topic which also plays an important role in the media. Innovations are seen as the "engine of a society". Just as it is the case with the PR representatives, the journalists also criticize an instrumentalization of the topic. Most of the participants perceive the term "innovation" as being problematic and link it primarily to negative associations. The reasons cited are the lack of clarity and high abstraction level of the term. In addition, the term is used by politicians and corporations in an inflationary manner, frequently without content or substance. The word "innovation" is almost always used when reporting on a new product since it is assumed that this will grab the interest of journalists. As one journalist colorfully describes it: "Beautiful, new, innovative, modern – those are all Pavlovian expressions that make the dogs drool."

Press releases regarding innovations basically increase the attention level: "Instead of one second one spends 15 seconds reading the release", noted one participant.

There is, however, the risk that the term innovation will increasingly degenerate into a verbal shell and the use of the term in press releases creates defensive reactions: “There isn’t a single press release in which the word innovative or innovation doesn’t appear at least once. It’s getting to the point where I can’t stand the word innovation any more. It no longer increases my attention level, but instead increases my resentment”, noted one specialized journalist.

3.2 Understanding the Role of Journalists and PR Professionals

The participants in the group of journalists demand that innovations are integrated into a social context (e.g., its utility for society or individual groups). They expressly felt that this was also a task which must be assumed by PR. However, those responsible for PR primarily view such a function as the duty of journalists. Both groups assigned different roles to PR: The journalists’ perception of PR is at societal level, while the PR representatives themselves primarily view their work as a communication task and management function.

How Do PR Representatives View Their Role?

According to PR specialists, the communications department within a company plays a decisive role in relaying innovations, since describing and communicating technology or innovations is not easy. The task of communications specialists is to prepare the subject in such a way that the customer or consumer utility becomes apparent. The improvement must be placed within a general context. In this regard, PR specialists see themselves as translators, because developers and engineers speak a different language than journalists.

Most PR specialists see their contacts among the members of the specialized or scientific press. This is particularly true for the field of technology. Nonetheless it is sometimes expedient to appear in the broader media. Basically, due to the prominence of the subject in public discussions, it has become easier to place innovations in news and popular media.

The role of PR in communicating innovations depends very much on the medium being addressed. The acceptance level for innovations as a topic is very high among the specialized press. It is the task of PR to adjust the information to be disseminated to the individual medium. This is because not every story is of equal interest to every medium. Aside from the material itself, it is also important to convince the journalists of a topic with reasoning.

In the eyes of the participants it is the task of those responsible for corporate communications to determine just how innovative an improvement really is. This is important for the credibility of one’s own work. PR functions as a “reality-check” within the corporation. PR is the first filter and must decide whether an innovation can or should be communicated to the outside. As one communications expert elaborated: “This means that PR bears a great responsibility. It must deal very critically with information intended for the media. PR must determine whether or

not there is even an innovation.” It is even frequently advisable to not even employ the term innovation in order to avoid reflexive defensive reactions.

How Do Journalists View Their Role?

Basically, journalists view innovations as an important topic which should be reported, even if they criticize the inflationary use of the term. According to the journalists participating in the focus group, before a subject is treated as being innovative, there must be a critical examination to determine whether the subject in question actually is novel. Innovation as an end in itself is dismissed. What counts are a development’s significance and its consequences.

Journalists see themselves as fulfilling the classic role of gatekeepers, as one who filters information, checks facts and develops subjects for his public. The journalistic duty of due diligence insists on information to be critically illuminated and a differentiation to be made between actual and putative innovations. Journalists take up innovation topics when these can be linked to a subject that has social or individual relevance. The economics editor of a daily newspaper explained: “The role of the journalist is not to celebrate actual and putative innovations, but instead, to provide proven facts. This implies maintaining a critical distance which, in turn, implies classifying and interpreting innovations and all that which this term carries with it”.

It is the consequences of an innovation which are crucial. The participants particularly pointed to the social implications as well as the consequences on employment, economic development or the day-to-day life of individuals: “We look at what is interesting, what is worth communicating, what is important in forming opinions, what is relevant to our viewers.” “It is the value of benefit that is important”, added another participant. At the same time he warned against a too narrow definition of utility: “Value of benefit does not mean: hey, there’s a new cell phone. I’m not interested in that. What interests me is: what are the consequences when companies start using digital instead of analog technology? What does this mean to a product, to production, to people, to the price, and so on.”

In general, the journalists agree that they do not like to be used for the purposes of product PR. “If the PR people constantly call me to say they’ve invented something new, my response is: great, but what’s the subject? Don’t try to sell us products, sell us topics!”, one business journalist insisted. “We don’t report on innovations as such, we report on topics”, a colleague agreed. One business journalist included political PR: “Journalists quite rightly do not play along when politicians propagandize innovations in a one-sided manner or as an end in itself. This is the case when, for example, politicians concentrate only on the opportunities and fail to mention the risks of a development”.

Handling innovations is frequently made more difficult for editors because of their journalists’ lack of background knowledge. “If something really is an innovation then it’s usually so specialized and technical that – being an business journalist – it just falls through the cracks. It’s more likely to be a topic for the scientific editor and I pass it on”, noted one participant. In general, greater technical knowledge on the part of business journalists is seen as being desirable.

The journalists view the type of medium as representing a decisive factor in how innovations are dealt with. News and popular media address a broad audience. Complicated contents are translated into the public's language and the background and opportunities of a development are clarified. As one television journalist explained: "Basic research just doesn't stand a chance on television. We wait for the broader application of a technology. It is then that we can tell our viewers, for example, you can now buy this product, this is what it can do and this is what it costs."

Innovations are frequently characterized by their high level of complexity, dubious utility and unforeseeable consequences. Specialized media will pick up those topics which because of these characteristics would simply not resonate with the general public. In addition to specialized publications and scientific magazines of the press and electronic media, the participants in the journalist group also note, for example, supplements in daily newspapers (especially science and technology). Specialized media treat innovation subjects in a completely different way. In general, they give them more editorial space and the contents are tailored to a clearly defined target audience. This results in topics receiving different emphasis and being presented in a different way.

4 Summary and Conclusions

Journalists and communication experts discussed in two focus groups the public debate regarding innovations and the role media and PR professionals play in this debate. Participants of the journalist's round were business journalists, who are specialized in topics of company and business reporting as well as those, who include political (especially economic-political) aspects in their work. Technology and science journalists were omitted. All participants of the communication expert's round were representatives of companies or agencies, while representatives of political communication did not take part.

The discussion covered communication activities of companies and politicians as well as media coverage on innovations. The experts were asked to tell, how they deal with innovations in their work. Furthermore they should assess how the opposite group does work.

There are two basic levels of consideration: On macro-level we focused on the circumstances and preconditions of communication activities drawn from general frames. From this point of view, the public debate regarding innovation forms a crucial starting point for the work of both journalists as well as communication experts, providing them with introduced issues that are in place and can be updated. Second, on the micro-level journalists and communications experts deal with innovation topics in their given context of work. Thus, the action of journalists and PR professionals when communicating (or not communicating) innovations is the key focus.

Based on the statements of the experts in the two focus groups, four theses can be formulated:

(1) When reporting on innovations, journalists are acting according to the general frame they are settled in.

The business journalist in the focus group emphasized relevance for business and, even more, consequences for customers, private investors and employees for their deciding, if an innovation is reported on or not. Due to the fact that most of the participants work for popular media, the focus on everyday life is not surprising. In taking explicitly political aspects into account, the economic editor of a daily newspaper introduced a further aspect. According to the political frame, he considers it important to focus on the meaning of innovation for political processes and societal life.

While popular journalists name precise conditions for reporting on innovation, specialized journalists are much more sympathetic to the topic. Generally they are attentive to innovations, reporting on the topic systematically, continuously and extensively. Furthermore, they hold a special perspective on innovations. First of all, they want to publish novelties in order to deliver information for experts and professionals of a special field. By contrast, popular journalists make higher demands on innovations selected for reporting. As a consequence, most innovations fall through the cracks.

(2) There is a basic difference between most journalists and PR professionals in the way dealing with innovations.

While journalists focus on the relevance of innovations for audience and society when reporting on innovations, PR experts of companies and agencies have an agenda when they communicate the topic.

PR representatives primarily view their work as a communication task and management function. They use the term innovation to increase the chances of their own messages being noticed by the media and the public. In contrast, political and business journalists working in popular media demand that innovations are integrated in a social context. Actually, they do so in their own work. Specialized journalist and – probably – technology journalists are closer to the PR professional's understanding of innovation emphasizing technical and managerial aspects. Not surprisingly, participants of the PR group declared to focus their activities on specialized media.

PR activities of companies are an important starting point for innovation reporting. Journalists perceive the term innovation as inflationary and therefore being problematic. The term is primarily linked with negative associations. Most PR professionals agree and identify both positive (higher degree of attention) as well as negative consequences (reflexive defensive reactions) when using the topic in communication. Some pointed out, even to avoid therefore the term in communication activities. This leads to the third and fourth theses taking the macro-level into account.

(3) The different areas of innovation reporting are not isolated, but influence each other.

Different frames and topics on the public agenda are related to each other. Therefore, a wide range of issues influence innovation communication as well as innovation reporting. The perceived appreciation of scientific and knowledge topics in recent years is a good example for a general trend innovations are profiting from.

Relating to the ongoing public debate this means, that for instance the way, innovation are communicated in the field of politics, biases the work of journalists and PR professionals in the fields of business and technology. Particularly, this is true for popular media. It can be supposed, that the more specialized a media outlet is, the less important these interrelations become and the more autonomous communicating activities and media reporting becomes.

(4) Especially the political debate regarding innovations affects activities in all areas of reporting.

Experts in both groups noticed heavy activity of politicians on the matter of innovation in recent years. These activities are a significant contributor to the topic's current popularity. As the PR experts stated, suddenly there is a significantly greater demand for subjects related to innovations. This is true for all types of media.

At the same time, all journalists and PR experts identify high risks: If communication activities of politics and other groups do not deliver what the term innovation holds, the topic becomes negatively biased and provokes defense reactions. In the view of all experts, this is exactly what has already happened. This corresponds with results of the survey Innovate 2004: Almost all journalists and communication experts remark, that the tremendous use and misuse of the term are responsible for low media attention. Furthermore half of the journalists and four out of ten communication experts even agreed with the statement that innovations work as a mere label which benefits actors in the public debate.⁶

⁶ Mast, Claudia/Huck, Simone/Zerfass, Ansgar: Innovation Communication. Outline of the concept and Empirical Findings from Germany, p.5. In: Innovation Journalism Vol. 2 (2005) No.7, pp. 1-14. <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-2-7.pdf>

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