

Innovative Journalism as a Base for Innovation Journalism

Amanda Termén

Business and politics reporter at the Gothenburg Post
Innovation Journalism Fellow 2006, Stanford
Hosted by CNET News.com
Phone: +1 415 425 9501 (US) +46 70 22 33 555 (Sweden)
Email: [amandatermen @ yahoo.se](mailto:amandatermen@yahoo.se)

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Modern publications do not only cover innovation. They increasingly become innovators themselves, making use of the technological developments that they write about daily. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how innovation within journalism can be used to do innovation journalism, showing the tech news website CNET News.com as an example. Why is it important to live what you write about, and how does it improve the coverage of the innovation process?

1 Introduction

After visiting the Bay Area host publications with this year's Innovation Journalism fellows, ending up at CNET News.com felt like a jackpot. Even if all newsrooms covered innovation in one way or another, News.com was the one that truly seemed to practice what it preached.

The website experimented with features like podcasts, vodcasts (video podcasts) and real-time reporting and seemed anxious to explore the emerging possibilities, offered by the Internet, to bring the news of innovation to its audience.

I must admit that when settling into my cubicle and getting down to business, I realized that the willing adoption of new technology in the CNET newsroom is not always for the best – at least not for a contact-seeking new hire. The “live” collegial chit-chat has been replaced by Yahoo instant messenger, the spinal cord of the newsroom. Coffee breaks have been rationalized – those who bring sweets to the office drop them on a table, return to their cubicles and send out a mass email: “Carrot cake at the other end of the room, please serve yourselves.”

Despite minor newsroom culture shocks, the willingness and efforts of News.com to change and evolve as a medium remains interesting. The expression *innovative journalism* in this paper's headline refers to the adoption of new technologies and ideas on how to distribute news to an audience. At CNET News.com, this innovative approach forms the basis for doing *innovation journalism*¹, in the sense

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/INJO-1-1.pdf>.

of journalism focusing on the process of technological innovation, studying the technical, business, legal and political aspects of innovations and innovation systems.²

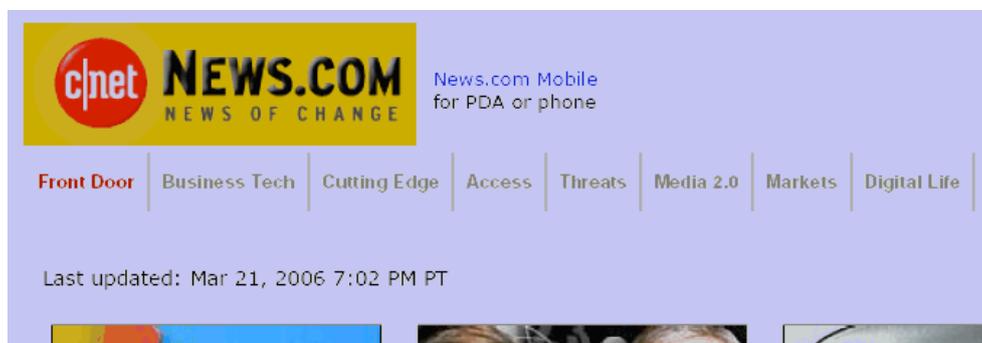
This paper maps some of the innovations and publishing techniques used by CNET News.com, examines the publication's innovation climate and policy and explores how innovation is used to picture the innovation process in news.

Most of the work has been done through interviews with staff and management at CNET News.com, and by browsing the news site.

2 News of change

About CNET News.com

The News.com website is crowned by a logo saying “News.com – News of change.” The site provides breaking news, features and special reports about technology. Sections include business tech, cutting edge, communications, security threats, media 2.0, markets and digital life.



News.com belongs to CNET Networks, together with other technology sites for product reviews (CNET.com), software downloads (Download.com), technology shopping (CNET shopper), gaming, photo sharing etc.

CNET was launched in 1995 with the vision of becoming a 24 hour cable TV channel and online multimedia service about technology. News.com was born in 1996, claims to have published the first banner ad ever and calls itself “a

² D. Nordfors, D. Kreiss, J. Sandred. “Introducing an Innovation Journalism Index”, Innovation Journalism , Vol. 2 No. 2. <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-2-5.pdf>

recognized early adopter of online news-delivery capabilities such as Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds.”³

In February 2006, News.com had 2,6 million unique users and 18,5 million page views⁴.

3 Spaghetti on the Wall

3.1 The Innovative Policy of CNET News.com

The first thing that meets morning grumpy staff entering the CNET building in San Francisco is the four corporate values in capital letters, on the wall of the entrance hall:

Passion – we care

Innovation – we find a better way

Integrity – we are true to our word

Teamwork – we succeed together

CNET’s vision is to be a “different kind of media company”, pioneering the Internet media industry through innovation. “We embrace innovation and celebrate it with everything we do,”⁵ is how the company describes its approach.

The “finding a better way” means moving forward through “thinking beyond what’s merely possible to what people really want and need, and to innovate to those ideals,” according to the website of CNET Networks.

3.2 Innovative from the start

The first employees of News.com were to become backpack journalists. “We armed them with video cameras, audio recorders and notebooks. They did it all,” said Jai Singh, editor-in-chief and founding editor of the website.

He said striving for innovation was inherent in the company structure from the start, since CNET was launched the same year as the Netscape browser; the Internet medium was practically unexplored territory. News.com aimed to become

³ <http://www.cnetnetworks.com/aboutus/brands.html>

⁴ Nielsen NetRatings, Month of February 2006, U.S. Home and Work Combined Panel

⁵ CNET Networks Vision/Mission. <http://www.cnetnetworks.com/aboutus/mission.html>

the biggest multimedia news site out there. “But we found out that nobody cared about video and audio,” Singh said.

Since broadband was slow and expensive, most home users couldn’t hear and see the audio and video news broadcasted on the site. In half a year, the multimedia effort was disbanded and the focus placed on written articles. Was it a defeat?

Not if you ask Jai Singh. CNET was just ahead of its time, and the striving for innovation continued. “If you fast forward to 2006, we are doing a lot of video and audio,” he said.

Once again, the company is focusing on developing multimedia elements on the site. Staff with competence in filming and TV has been hired to extend the video features.

Since July 2005, audio news podcasts are made daily and attract increasing numbers of subscribers who download them to computers, mp3 players and handheld units. The broadcasts are available via iTunes and networked TiVo video recorders.

The weekly audio round-table discussion was turned into a video podcast for the first time on March 10 2006, and a vodcast series on Internet security and threats was introduced one week later. An expanded on-demand video presence is part of CNET plans for the future.

3.3 Seeing what sticks

Even if there is an incentive from the management for constant innovation at News.com, specific initiatives usually come from people on the floor.

The news podcasts were initiated by Charles Cooper, executive editor of commentary, who read about and listened to the podcasts that started to pop up around the web. He didn’t like what he heard, and even wrote a blog post about how terrible most podcasts were, but came around to thinking that News.com could turn them into something useful.

“I went to Jai and said: ‘I think it is something our users would like. I don’t know what I’m doing, I have no experience in radio, but I want to give it a shot,’ and Jai said ‘ok,’ ”Cooper said. “It is like throwing a plate of spaghetti against the wall and seeing what sticks.”

Scott Ard, executive news editor, agrees. “We just try to do different stuff, we are always trying something new. We are in a big company but can always say ‘Let’s renegade. What the hell, let’s try it.’ ”

The newsroom experiments go straight up on the website, no dummies are made, Ard said. “It just takes too long. We don’t need clearance. If it doesn’t work, no one is going to get his hands slapped over it. Some of it we stick with, some of it goes away.”

4 "We eat our dog food"

4.1 Practicing What You Preach

To Jai Singh, the reason for innovation is a given. "If you don't embrace innovation, you will die. Because the user wants it," he said.

CNET News.com defines its readership as "people who need to stay ahead of the curve – people who are constantly exploring, evaluating and buying."⁶ They are early adopters of technology, many of them professionals in the tech industry. Most are between 30 and 50 years old, male, well educated with a high income and feeling very comfortable with technology.⁷

These readers, interested in the news of innovation, also demand the medium which brings them the news to practice innovation. "The cliché here is 'We eat our dog food,' " Cooper said, and Ard agreed.

"Anyone can write a story, make a headline and put it on the web. You've got to show that you've got some experiment going. Our readers are techies, many are developers, they've seen tricks on other publications and blogs. They expect it. We need to add something different to the site so that we don't just spit out stories," Ard said.

He points to the feature "trackback" as an example – a feature at the bottom of every article that allows readers to see which blogs and other websites have linked to and commented on the article. "It is very geeky, not many people use it, but it is easy to put it in there, to add that extra spice, to say 'We know about trackback, there you go. It's not rocket science.' "

4.2 Fast medium to cover fast-moving industry

Since technology is an industry where innovation happens fast, a fast medium is needed to follow the developments. Cooper compares News.com with monthly technology magazines.

"Covering the technology sector you need a site operation at par with it. A monthly magazine has a two-to-three-month cycle. An iPod is introduced every six months, and here you are working at a paper with a three-month delay. The technology has already passed you by the time you have finished the next edition," he said.

⁶ CNET Networks Vision/Mission. <http://www.cnetnetworks.com/aboutus/mission.html>

⁷ Interview with Harry Fuller, executive editor of video content

5 Connecting the dots

5.1 Combining technologies to embrace the innovation process

Covering the process of technological innovation, from ideas and rumors to the launching of a product on the market, CNET News.com uses many innovative means of communication.

The multimedia possibilities, interconnectivity and instant nature of the Internet are used to cover the technological, business, legal and political aspects of innovation, adding up to connect the dots of the innovation process.

5.2 Video: gadgets and how-tos

Harry Fuller, Executive Editor, was brought into CNET News.com last September to get more video on the site. Many of the video clips concern product information and new gadgets, where it is easier to show the physical product than to describe it in words.

“A new version of Internet Explorer or new products from Apple – people want to see whether they want to buy it or not. We are part of the early decision process,” Fuller said.

One of the video clips is attached to an article by Elinor Mills, senior reporter covering Google, about the new Google desktop. In the clip, Mills browses the desktop features and explains them to the readers.

“Someone’s going to have to use it, I think people like video instead of reading a manual,” she said. “And they like seeing a face, someone that interacts with the technology instead of seeing just the product.”

It’s not only the readers who learn from the video clips. “It forces me to learn more about the product, and it is a nice overall package – a story plus a video to go with it, plus audio. The more packaged stuff we do, the better the coverage,” Mills said.

5.3 Audio: Stinkers and Rumors

Every Friday an audio podcast roundtable discussion is made where reporters discuss a hot topic that has been going on during the week, for example how Google legal problems affect the company’s credibility and business.

Mills participated in this discussion and thinks that the podcasts are a good idea. “Reporters know the topics. They can give good analysis about the big picture, issues and reactions. It gets us away from just pure product stories,” said Mills, who feels that covering the appearance of new products on the market takes a lot of time as a tech reporter.

“Often there is no time for a follow-up with more analysis about what happens to the market and what it means to the users. In the podcasts, you can speak at the top of your head.”

Cooper makes a daily podcast, summing up the latest news and interviewing companies as well as reporters. He feels that the podcasts add a perspective on innovation that often does not come out in writing. “This is a way for reporters to talk about issues, predictions and rumors that may not make it into news,” he said.

In Cooper’s opinion, the audio clips also help to make complicated technology reporting less dry and more personal, and make the story more alive to the users.

“When you get the reporters on tape, listeners can hear them express more analysis than they would do in a story. I can ask Ina (Fried, Microsoft reporter): ‘So this new product from Microsoft – a stinker?’ And she will say ‘Yeah!’ ”

5.4 Live Blogging: Boos and Surprises

Live blogging, or real-time reporting, is one of the most recent experiments at News.com. The first one was carried out during Apple CEO Steve Jobs’ keynote speech at Macworld in January. It was a running commentary, posted live during the speech that unveiled new Apple products.

“It is great when there is going to be something big and new announced – surprises, visual events or big news,” Mills said. “You can put color to it that wouldn’t do in a story, like ‘He got booed’ or ‘Cheers from the crowd.’ ”

Mills was the one to perform the second live blog⁸, from an analyst meeting at the Google headquarters, right after the company CFO had hinted at slowed growth and caused a sharp decline in Google shares. “Investors went crazy, we thought there would be more surprises coming up that readers would want to find out about right away,” she said.

1:31:11. It was a very solid quarter.

Question: Why was the tax rate higher, then? Reyes: "The tax rate was higher because more of Google's profits (outside the U.S.) became taxable in the U.S. at far higher rates."

1:50 Reyes is joined onstage by Schmidt and co-founders Page and Brin, who prepare to take questions from the audience.

1:49 Reyes: Google is showing phenomenal year over year--growth in revenue, operating income and free cash flow operation

⁸ http://news.com.com/Live+Google+faces+off+with+analysts/2100-1030_3-6045103.html

Audio clips of controversial statements on Google's censorship in China and CEO predictions about the future were added to the live blog afterwards.

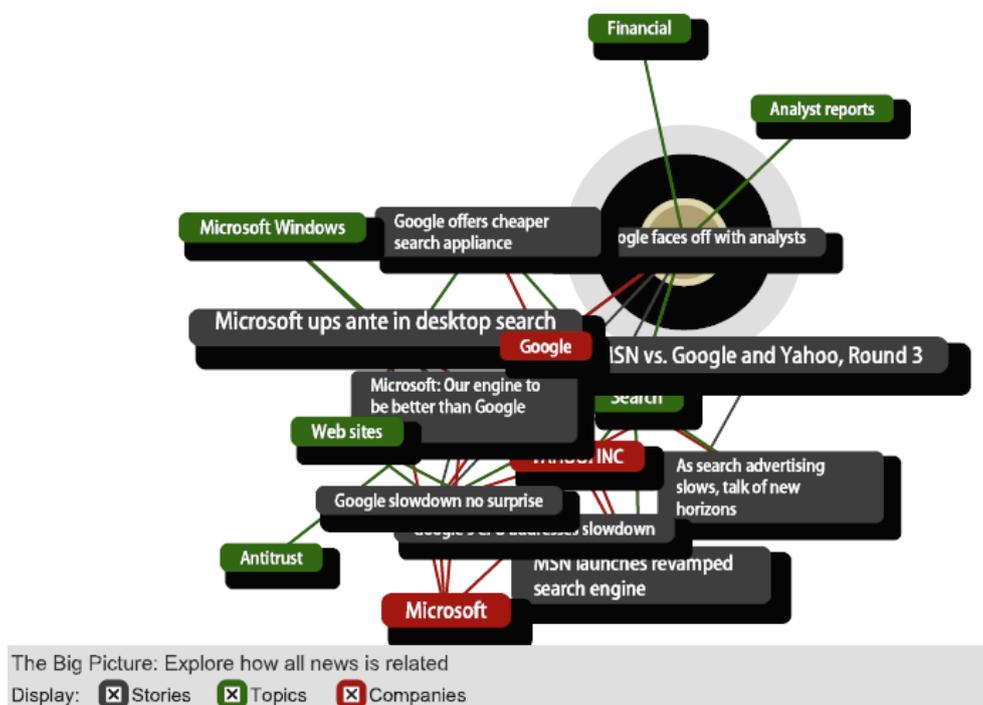
No matter how innovative, however, one of CNET News.com's partner Web sites in Asia, trying to translate the news, didn't care much for the format. The reason: such a long piece of text is a nightmare to translate and doesn't have the biggest news on the top, making a case for the trusted inverted pyramid.

To help readers through the massive record after the meeting was over, key parts were highlighted in yellow just like on a piece of paper.

5.5 Links: the shopping mall of knowledge

Publishing on the Internet gives CNET the possibility of connecting different aspects of the innovation process for a wider understanding, through different types of links.

- **Stock quotes:** With every story about a product or a company, there is a sidebar showing the stock quotes of all companies involved. Clicking on it leads to a detailed summary of the current stock market situation.
- **The big picture:** Another side bar feature is "The big picture" (see below) which promises to explore how all news is related. It draws a visual spider web, similar to a mind map, between related stories, topics and competing companies around the object of the article.



- **Links to other CNET pages and sites:** During a patent lawsuit which threatened to shut down service for all users of the popular BlackBerry wireless emailing devices, News.com made a roundup page. It was called “Blackberry Getting Squeezed?”⁹ and collected all the news stories, columns, analysis and audio roundtable discussions made around the case, giving a complete picture of its history.

The page also linked to CNET video reviews of BlackBerry products and a comparison of models with ratings, price comparisons and links to shopping sites. Another link led to Blackberry software at Download.com.

“CNET is like a shopping mall. You buy some clothes, eat a pretzel and go to a movie. We own all those stores,” Ard said. He sees the same overall philosophy for the news, reviews and download sites: to give readers more information about the products and companies that they are interested in.

CNET Networks is currently working to integrate the News, reviews and downloads sites even further.

- **Links to competitors:** News.com Extra, accessible from the front page, is a section where readers are directed to technology stories from other websites: “Our reporters and editors handpick the stories that you shouldn’t miss, with the goal of expanding your knowledge.”¹⁰

Another feature is the Blogma, highlighting the most popular technology topics discussed in blogs across the web, and linking to the related sites.

Aren’t these features playing in the hands of CNET competitors?

“The readers are smart enough to know that we are not the only tech site,” Ard said. “We can’t do it all, we only have 20 reporters and the tech industry is so damn big. We thought that if the readers go through here, and we provide a little guidance, they will come back. We are providing a service; we want to remain a useful news aggregator.”

⁹ http://news.com.com/BlackBerry+getting+squeezed/2009-1047_3-6042243.html

¹⁰ http://news.com.com/News.com+launches+Extra+edition/2030-9373_3-5258814.html?tag=st.ne.xtra

6 Conclusion

The two questions posed in the beginning of this paper were: why is it important to live what you write about, and how does it improve the coverage of the innovation process?

The CNET target audience is interested in innovation, early adopters who use new technologies in daily life. These readers want their news delivered through the channels they use – work computers, mobile phones, TiVos, iPods and other handheld units.

Apart from accessing the news through up-to-date technology, they also expect it to be created in an innovative way. News.com staff need to show that they have “some experiment going” to build confidence and interest with the users, to show that they practice what they preach and know the technologies they cover. If an experiment fails, it is okay – it is part of the process.

Creative solutions like reporters guiding through new products on video are made to help users learn, but they also extend the knowledge of reporters. Journalists are forced to find out more about the innovations they cover, which improves the quality of reporting.

Widening the scope from pure technology, innovative journalism can bridge traditional beats like technology, law and business and give an overview of the innovation process.

All the features on News.com are used to picture different aspects of innovation. Traditional articles cover technology happenings and developments, audio interviews provide opinion and analysis, roundtable discussions elaborate on business, legal and political issues, instrumental video demonstrations help users understand new products, real-time reporting breaks the fast-moving technology news when it happens, and sidebar links provide company stock information.

Linking this wide variety of content together on the Internet, CNET connects the dots of tech reporting into a picture of the innovation process.

7 References

7.1 Interviews at CNET News.com

Scott Ard, executive news editor

Charles Cooper, executive editor of commentary and podcasts

Harry Fuller, executive editor of video content

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Amanda Termén is a 2006 Innovation Journalism Program fellow, hosted by CNET News.com in San Francisco. In Sweden, she works as a business and politics reporter at the Gothenburg Post, the daily newspaper of Sweden's second largest city. She has worked as a culture editor, web editor and reporter at several newspapers in Sweden. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Gothenburg and a European Diploma in International Journalism from the universities of Utrecht, Holland and Aarhus, Denmark, plus a supplementary degree in International Relations, International Politics and European Studies.