

Innovation Journalism Teamwork: How and Why?

Erika Ingvald

Elektroniktidningen, Stockholm, Sweden
Innovation Journalism Fellow 2006, Stanford,
Hosted by PC World
E-mail: erika.ingvald @ telia.com

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Teamwork innovation journalism makes it to the first page and gets readers attention. This paper shows journalists the ‘how’ and ‘why’. It gives examples from Sweden’s leading technology weekly and from a group of freelancers. My hope is that readers will find teamwork interesting enough to try it for themselves, as reporters or as editors charged with assembling teams or buying freelance material.

The reader is expected to have journalistic skills and to know how to do research, how to be critical, balanced and accurate and how to handle ethical dilemmas. Basic journalism is beyond the scope of this paper.

1 Introduction

The worldwide trend of the last decade, in which research is conducted with increasing ambitions of creating commercial spin-offs¹ has called for a new concept in journalism: Innovation Journalism² (InJo), using quality as the key factor driving this process³.

Applying InJo is a challenge both to journalists and editorial organizations. The challenges range from lack of adequate skills among individual reporters to fear among editors of losing audience by going outside the general readership profile⁴.

Using teamwork in InJo is one obvious way to overcome the lack of adequate skills among individual reporters. But teamwork faces challenges, too, such as newsrooms with firm section editors and rigid ‘beat’ structures or a culture of among reporters of working as single individuals. Overcoming these barriers

¹ The Role of Innovation Journalism in Science News Media, by Marie Granmar, Innovation Journalism Vol.2 No.10, Jun 21 2005

² 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>

³ Traditional beats - business, technology, science and political journalism - only cover specific aspects of innovation, but since innovation cuts across all the traditional beats, it needs to cover technical, business, legal and political aspects of innovation, how they interact and affect each other, D. Nordfors, The Role of Journalism in Innovation Systems, Innovation Journalism Vol.1 No.7, November 8 2004. <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-1-7.pdf>

⁴ Introducing an Innovation Journalism Index – Benchmarking the Swedish Market, by David Nordfors, Daniel R. Kreiss and Jan Sandred. Innovation Journalism Vol.2 No.5, May 4 2005

should be worthwhile since the result is often a success, shown here by examples from the Swedish news.

2 The Whys of Team Work

Innovation is the core activity of many leading industries and a factor that affects many peoples' lives. It is a main driver for economic growth. That makes it newsworthy. By covering innovation, media affects the players in the innovation systems⁵. These aspects call for a high standard of journalistic quality among those practicing InJo.

Covering innovation is a 'skills' game. Apart from standard journalistic skills—a nose for news and a gift for storytelling—it takes enough knowledge in broad fields of technology and sciences to understand how an invention works, and translate it to the readers. The understanding of business logics is also important, to see if the business model works. The InJo practitioner may also need to understand the process of policy making to predict the future of an invention—for example; will the government allow the use of the drug a researcher developed from stem cell research? The question: Is it really an innovation, not just an invention⁶?

For most people this calls for about three university degrees. It's still not enough. Once the InJo concept is understood, implementation is the challenge.⁷ Superhuman persuasive powers are needed to sell editors InJo stories (unless the writer is lucky and has aptitude). Editors' believe they know their readers' preferences, their ability to handle multiple story threads, or are lazy. As any good salesperson will explain, knowledge in psychology probably helps, too.

The problem: most journalists are only equipped with bits and pieces from the InJo tool box. That's where teamwork counts. Assembling the right people helps

⁵ The work of Innovation Journalists may help competitor organizations to adjust their own product and marketing strategies. It may affect potential investors where and when to direct capital, it may channels of distribution, and also researchers, who often work in secret, as formulated on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innovation_journalism, on March 20, 2006. For deeper analysis see 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.

⁶ Innovation journalism identifies and reports on key issues in the innovation systems, on the main actors, their agendas, and their interactions with each other. Common themes: science and technology trends, science and R&D policies, intellectual property, investments, standardization, industrial production processes, marketing of new technologies, business models, and politics as formulated on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innovation_journalism, on March 20, 2006.

⁷ In order for text to be "innovation journalism", it has to cover both the invention and the market. While these two elements are sufficient and necessary for calling it innovation journalism, other elements, such as policy making, can be added to make the text even more useful or enjoyable for the readership. Magnus Höij "Components of Innovation Journalism". *Innovation Journalism* Vol.1 No.5, September 17 2004

practical InJo fast and with high quality. Done correctly, the team or news room will always be first with the news, and that's what journalism is all about. It makes sense in the news business as well. Quality, to a certain degree, helps sell ads. And if increased quality can be delivered without extra cost, it is worthwhile.

3 In House Team Work – A Long Runner

Ny Teknik is Sweden's leading technology weekly. A little less than a decade ago, when I was a *Ny Teknik* staff writer, lots of venture capital organizations and startup companies suddenly emerged, seemingly from nowhere.

These were signs in Sweden of the universal trend of commercialization of research⁸. But the question was how and where to report on these newcomers?

Ny Teknik had no business news beat. It had not been considered interesting to the readership, the Swedish engineers. The paper was full of news about inventions, but without stories on innovation. In 1997 *Ny Teknik* introduced a new beat, Frontlinjen – “The Front Line”, covering technology research news. Few in the newsroom believed that it would catch on with the readers⁹ but it soon became one of their favorite news sections.

Encouraged by the success, believing that this new world of innovations was important to the Swedish engineers, then editor-in-chief Sten Haage in 1998 commissioned recently employed reporter, Marie Alpman, to spearhead a business beat.

The traditional news coverage of *Ny Teknik* was typical tech reporting - optimistic and seldom critical. Technology journalists are generally positive to new technologies, cover issues they believe in and reject those they mistrust. Consequently, the technologies of start-ups were generally positively described in the paper. There was no analysis either of what these technologies would be used for or if the companies had strategies and business plans that would bring them successfully the market. Overcoming this style of reporting was a challenge¹⁰.

The result was a box-office success that endures: “Teknik i tillväxt” (Technology in growth)¹¹, covering start-ups, their technologies and their survival and earnings

⁸ The Role of Innovation Journalism in Science News Media, by Marie Granmar, Innovation Journalism Vol.2 No.10, Jun 21 2005

⁹ This beat was skilfully developed and driven by *Ny Teknik*'s senior editor Ulla Karlsson Ottosson, and I was the first reporter fully assigned to it. It was a wonderful journey for all of us involved, not least the response given to us from our readers. And it started generating information on patents and new start-ups we couldn't cover properly.

¹⁰ Interview with Marie Alpman, *Ny Teknik*, for this study in March 2006, by Erika Ingvald

¹¹ The whole series is collected on the web at: <http://www.nyteknik.se/teknikitillvaxt.asp>

potential. Among the many readers are venture capitalists as well as representatives of smaller technology enterprises, and many became eager to be covered themselves. Exactly how much attention each story draws depends on the technology described, without regard to specific patterns in technology.

According to Marie Alpman, multiple entrances are a key to a successful story. One entrance for tech savvies, another for those interested in the business and corporate issues, including for example intellectual property strength. Her conclusion becomes particularly interesting in the view of 2004 InJo Fellow Magnus Höij's suggestion that for a story to be labeled innovation journalism, it must include both the inventions and the market.¹²

Due to the success, the editorial board decided to keep the series through the recession after the 'bubble.' "Then it was tough to find new candidates, as companies we had believed in went bankrupt," Marie explains. The first in this long run series of articles was published in September 1999; since then ~20 have been published every year—one article every second issue.

At first Marie Alpman produced them by herself. But it was heavy duty doing the writing, researching each article, visiting the organizations, finding and interviewing possible customers, competitors and financiers, checking patent portfolios and company data, etc. Eventually, one of Marie's senior colleagues, Erik Mellgren, started to contribute to the series. One of his strengths was that he had contributed to *Frontlinjen* (The Front Line), the tech research news beat, a job that supplied him first-hand information on research activities aimed at start-ups.

The collaboration between Marie and Erik has been successful. They usually don't use multiple bylines but collaborate in almost all other respects. They have alternated in being responsible for the series, they run approximately every second story, and together they seek and evaluate new companies, an important step when deciding what to cover, what to put in the basket. The present editor-in-chief Lars Nilsson also contributes to these discussions, as well as other *Ny Teknik* reporters.

In Swedish newsrooms the tradition is strong to let whoever pitches an idea do the work and receive the byline. This is based on the widespread assumption that this person has the most knowledge and the strongest commitment among colleagues to break a good story. That tradition lets reporters dynamically enter other than their standard beats, through their own effort. On occasion the team of "Technology in growth" has benefited from this tradition. "We want other reporters to take an active part in this, not least since it's easy after a while to get the feeling one has written the same article over and over again," Marie Alpman explains.

Since the series started, *Ny Teknik* has visited and analyzed about 120 companies. They are followed up every year, and if newsworthy activity occurs, the team will report it. For this, Marie has built a database in Access. She maintains it but through the yearly update on account-closings the burden is shared. Discussions

¹² Magnus Höij "Components of Innovation Journalism by. Innovation Journalism". Vol.1 No.5, September 17 2004

include issues such as what to do with last year's bankruptcy now operating under a new name with the same idea and how to handle mergers and buyouts.

In seeking newcomers, the team has systemized the scanning for new companies, e.g. at Sweden's technology parks, or in the diaries of agencies and foundations funding applied research and innovation. Together they attend investor meetings, set up further meetings and have informal discussions with venture capitalists with potential interest.

A spin-off to the *Ny Teknik* team work is a research project at Stockholm School of Economics, a PhD-work on the early development of an organization in newly started technology businesses¹³. The work is done by a graduate student, Ingela Sölvell, and her professor, Frederic Delmar. They support Marie Alpman and Erik Mellgren in judging the potential of different business ideas covered.

"In conclusion, the tough part is not to understand the technology itself but to review the commercialization critically and judge whether there is a market for the particular product. That's where we collaborate." Marie says. According to her the teamwork evaluation on start-ups shared the burden, having someone who can act as a sounding board, ask critical questions and contribute periodically with their networks when looking for people to interview for the complete story¹⁴.

4 In House Team Work – An Experiment

Some years ago, the *Ny Teknik* staff decided to benchmark Sweden's growth regions: measuring the power of innovation and renewal of each of country's eleven high-tech regions.

Marie Alpman was assigned to plan this series, "Power of Growth"¹⁵, with another *Ny Teknik* staff writer, Helen Ahlbom, a highly regarded IT reporter. They had two weeks to plan the series and pin down the most relevant measures on innovation and renewal for a region.

To obtain critical statistics, the team raised a budget to make database runs at two key Swedish government agencies on these matters, ITPS¹⁶ and SCB¹⁷. Reporters

¹³ Interview with Marie Alpman, March, 2006

¹⁴ Interview with Marie Alpman, March, 2006

¹⁵ The whole series is published at <http://www.nyteknik.se/teknikITillvax.asp>

¹⁶ ITPS, The Swedish institute for Growth Policy Studies, the Swedish Government's agency for understanding growth and for evaluating government policies.

¹⁷ SCB, Statistics Sweden, is a central Swedish government authority for official statistics and other government statistics and in this capacity also has the responsibility for coordinating and supporting the Swedish system for official statistics.

were sent to each region to perform so-called impacts—key interviews for the final report.

The result was a series of articles published in 2004 and 2005 describing the regions from four “C:s”; Capital, Competence, Creativity and Climate. Each region was given one big cover. The impacts were made by two reporters each, in a relay fashion.

The first impact, in a city called Luleå in the northernmost part of Sweden, was made by Marie¹⁸ and Helen who had developed the method, the second by Helen and a third reporter that had been taught the method; the third by that third reporter and a fourth person. Helen also participated in more than one impact; she was responsible for delivering the conclusions from the background research to the reporters visiting each region. The thought with using different reporters was to involve many people in the newsroom, training them in the method and getting them out to the regions.

The collaboration between Marie and Helen was a success because they complement each other. Helen has the journalistic, newsworthy drive; Marie is more of an investigator with statistical skills. At the same time, both have solid backgrounds covering technology news and trends.

While being a success, the new process was burdening everyone involved, creating a heavy workload with planning the indicators and expanding the project to the extent where it became hard to handle, Marie reports. Over-all, the greatest difficulty was technical: the time it takes to get statistics from the different systems and sources. “We wanted our reports to be as fresh as possible,” Marie comments.

One advantage with teamwork on the Power of Growth-series was the shared responsibility for evaluating an entire region. “Some regions graded very low. It would have been a heavy burden to present such an assessment alone,” Marie reflects.

The editorial board expressed the pressure they were experiencing in an insecure and nervous attitude towards the reporters. They increased their control over the research and news material to unprecedented levels; and reporters in the relay felt that strain at the same time as they had difficulties in identifying critical issues and attitudes from coworkers¹⁹.

But the series became a real success. No matter how well a region did, the team had decided beforehand to publish at least one critical aspect found during research, in a sidebar or in the main text, fighting the positive tradition of tech journalism. These stories measured something that touched people, the future of their regions. The effects were visible during the blockbuster regional panel debates set up by *Ny Teknik*, timed with publication of the respective regional reports.

¹⁸ The day after delivery of the first article, Marie delivered her baby and went on maternity leave.

¹⁹ Interviews with *Ny Teknik* staff members, March 2006.

These events showed how important²⁰ this kind of work can be to the innovation system and its (other) players, and how large an impact a newspaper has to the mindset of the system. It could be argued that using InJo methods—thorough research, accuracy and critical thinking, identical to those in mainstream journalism—contributed to that.

No pain, no gain. Whether this experiment will be repeated by Ny Teknik is left unsaid. But maybe it can be an example for someone else to learn from.

5 The Free Lance Team— A Long Runner

During the bubble years, before 2002, the demand for news on innovation was huge, as were the wells from which to pay for it. A Swedish senior freelancer, covering ICT *systems* got frustrated with all the pitches he never had time to complete and the money he didn't collect.

This senior freelancer had the nose for news and the drive for results. He decided to establish a news producing machine to beat all the newsrooms in quality and time.

He had set up a research group of young people who scanned the globe and set up automated search of an innumerable number of news sources from a small town 200 kilometers north of Stockholm.

He made agreements with a number of his former and new employers on buying articles in volume, and he built a network of freelancers²¹, from different places, skilled as well as freshmen, with different skills and talents.

Through the years, his network mass-produced front-page news and covered stories for many of Sweden's leading news media, even publishing in international press for a short while. These stories were published under multiple bylines, which was new to most of the news organizations who were the customers.

The procedure was as follows; the senior freelancer sold an idea for a story to a news organization, and then called the network member(s) he considered best suited for that particular job. If they had time they did the footwork, getting

²⁰ E.g. from debates in the regions of Blekinge: http://www.nyteknik.se/pub/ipsart.asp?art_id=35976, Stockholm: http://www.nyteknik.se/pub/ipsart.asp?art_id=37655, Skåne: http://www.nyteknik.se/pub/ipsart.asp?art_id=36395, and Karlstad: http://www.nyteknik.se/pub/ipsart.asp?art_id=38251.

²¹ I became part of the network in the spring of 2000 and every article we made for Dagens Nyheter (mainly under the business beat umbrella, but also within the consumers beat), one of the leading Swedish dailies, made it to the first page, some became top stories too. Although the stories we presented were rather innovative to these beats.

information on what to do, reporting back when done, and getting new pieces of the assignments until everything was reported.

In this manner every story evolved fast and dynamically. If somebody got stuck, found a new track that had to be followed, or had to finish another assignment (we were all running our own tracks, having plenty of hungry news buyers to report to during those first years) someone else was updated and filled in. In this way we could beat any newsroom within our niche in speed, quantity and quality, without having to carry the costs of a huge, full-time news machine.

The process gave young reporters entrance to new, important and complex innovations in global markets, e.g. covering the telecom industry's global standards and operations. Their bylines were seen on articles that made a difference in newspapers with maximum impact. This group wrote prescient articles headlined "2002 will be a black year for telecomm," and "3G will be delayed for at least a year," before anyone else dared.

There have always been buyers around viewing this method with suspicion, refusing to discuss collaboration because they did not understand the concept, questioning the multiple bylines, starting to defend their own newsrooms, wondering why they should buy from outsiders when they have their own IT-reporters, and so forth. These are often the same editors who will only publish stories that have been published by others before (what happened to the idea that it's only news the first time you hear it?), implying that they are not skilful enough to judge whether they have overlooked news. This was however never critical to business.

The tough times started when the bubble burst and the market collapsed for many publishers so that they could no longer buy in volume from freelancers. Many buyers' first (and natural) reaction was to slash the freelance budget to near zero.

To most organizations such a work reduction would have been disastrous, and it was not fun. The young research team behind the large scale success was laid off.

Some major buyers say they'll buy if the group produces, since they appreciate the stories and the quality of the work. But at the moment buyers can't guarantee volumes as they used to, making it difficult maintain the previous research activities.

The tough times have been—in my opinion—a period when the teamwork model has shown its strongest side. As competent freelancers, most survived. Those who didn't stay around as freelancers, became staffers or started new titles – this at times when staffers were fired and titles closed down. The network can still assemble a quick and efficient news machine when needed. It still happens from time to time.

6 Conclusion

Innovation Journalism will likely take you to the first page, done properly— using thorough research, accuracy and critical thinking, as in any mainstream journalism.

Innovation Journalism stories interest the readership because they concern matters touching and affecting many people. If presented correctly - ordinary story-telling skills apply - the stories are potential blockbusters, even if the individual editor may not believe so initially.

The coverage of innovation must combine technical reporting with business reporting and other key aspects in a single story. This involves covering both the invention and the markets, the competitive effect the invention has on the company and so forth. It is often faster, more efficient, more accurate and more fun to work in teams. The learning process engenders new collaborations or helps individual work.

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Erika Ingvald is a freelance reporter, affiliated with Sweden's main news source for professionals in the Swedish electronics industry, Elektroniktidningen. She was an Innovation Journalism Fellow in 2006, hosted by PC World. For many years she has contributed to *Ny Teknik*, Swedens well reputed technology weekly. She has also contributed to *Dagens Nyheter*, one of Swedens' largest dailies and to *Process Nordic*, an independent news journal covering the development within the process industry. She has a journalist degree from Uppsala University, Sweden, and a F.L. in Geology from Uppsala University, Sweden.