

Published January 29, 2006

## Elbert: Journalists need to get down to business — innovative business

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Journalism does a lousy job covering innovation, says David Nordfors, a research scholar at Stanford University.

Nordfors, a native of Sweden, was in Des Moines last week as part of a personal cross-country crusade to increase journalistic awareness of innovation. He believes it's an issue worthy of deeper coverage.

It's an issue that Des Moines venture capitalist John Pappajohn and I have talked a lot about over the years. Pappajohn, who invests in high-tech ventures, constantly pushes me and other reporters to write more about technology and new businesses being created in Iowa.

"The more you write about it," he has said several times, "the more people will become interested in it and see they can do it, too." After a while, innovation and entrepreneurship become self-fulfilling prophecies, he contends.

Pappajohn comes at the argument from the money-making side. Nordfors comes at it from a scientific and academic angle.

Nordfors says newspapers and news magazines are good at covering politicians and entertainers but sometimes find it difficult to truly get behind issues that drive today's news.

If we did, he said, we'd find a fascinating world of innovation. There is more innovation occurring today than at any time in history, he said. And the pace increases all the time.

Try as we might, most people can't escape it.

Innovation touches us all, every day, Nordfors said. But the popular press rarely writes about it. When we do, we often bungle it or miss the real story, he said.

An innovation such as the iPod is much more than just a technology story, he said. Sure, there is innovative technology in the machine, but the ultra-portable device also drives social and legal changes.

The iPod started out as a new way to listen to music. Now, it has moved into video, text and data applications. The device is changing the entertainment industry, and it's starting to have an impact on education.

Just last week, this newspaper had a story about how Iowa college students have started downloading course content onto hand-held computers and cell phones.

### David Nordfors

Swedish-born David Nordfors came to journalism in a roundabout way. He's a scientist by training with a Ph.D. in molecular quantum physics from Uppsala University in Sweden. While doing postdoctoral work in Germany in the mid-1990s, he became more interested in writing about science than practicing it.

He bounced around Europe and Israel in various technical and writing positions until he hit on the idea of promoting innovation journalism in 2004. He sold his idea to Stanford University and started a fellowship program for mid-career journalists at the California school.

The iPod is helping to change the rules of intellectual property and creating legal precedents that will determine for years to come how people make money.

There's already a growing market on eBay and other Internet sites for iPods that are preloaded with music and movies, according to a recent USA Today article. "Some of those sales may be legal, some not," digital music lawyer Andrew Bridges is quoted as saying.

In fact, successful technology innovations like the iPod help to change everything from the way music is recorded to how it is marketed to how it is used. It changes the entire distribution channel, from manufacturers to distributors to retailers, creating new jobs and eliminating others.

The ease of access allows us to constantly cram more information into our brains. Just last week, I interviewed two business leaders who mentioned the titles of new books they are reading. Only they aren't really reading the books. They are listening to digitally recorded formats of the book while driving to work or running errands.

It's cutting-edge stuff, and it's fascinating to readers, if we can get below the surface and understand the real story, Nordfors said.

Journalists are slow to get to innovation stories, he said, because we have not thought about innovation as a beat. Journalism schools teach the basics of interviewing, writing and editing, but most don't teach technology and business.

The journalism school at Drake University has recognized that and is trying to meld its business and journalism programs to produce journalism graduates who understand business issues.

Former Register publisher Charles Edwards heads both of those programs at Drake University. He told me last week that he's thinking about bringing more science into the journalism curriculum, too. But, he added, it's not easy to change academic curriculum quickly.

That's too bad, because Nordfors said that to be a good reporter today one needs "a thorough understanding of both technology and business matters."

A journalist who doesn't is likely to spew meaningless misinformation that won't do anybody any good, he said.

When journalists can't tell the difference between good information and bad, they produce stories that add nothing to the public debate of important issues, he said.

Journalists of the future don't need to be scientists or business people, but they need to be literate in both fields, he said.

Reporters often underestimate the power they have, Nordfors said.

"Everybody reads the same newspaper the same day and then they go out and have coffee and talk about it," he said.

"When they do that, are they going to talk about some new hot technology at Drake University which is attracting investment, or are they going to talk about what Anna Nicole Smith did at a party yesterday?"

"And which of those two are going to contribute most to economic growth in Des Moines?" Nordfors asked.

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