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Journalism professor: 'Newsrooms must adapt to cover innovation'

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Traditional media organisations are not well positioned to cover innovation, according to David Nordfors, director of the VINNOVA Research Center of Innovation Journalism at Stanford University. In an interview with EurActiv, Nordfors said newsrooms tend to divide issues into topics like business, technology and politics, but described innovation as an horizontal issue which cuts across several topics.

David Nordfors is the director of the VINNOVA Research Center of Innovation Journalism at Stanford University.

[To read a shortened version of this interview, please click here.](#)

What is innovation journalism?

It covers how innovation happens. That means the process of innovation – how ideas turn into new value in society, and the ecosystems of various actors who participate in the process of innovation.

You say we need a new common language to communicate about innovation. What is the role of journalism in generating and sharing this language?

Everything new needs new language. So when a new product comes along, it has a name and there are new stories around it. And for us to be able to discuss new things in society, we must continuously renew our language. What we don't think of is that language doesn't just appear in our heads.

A large part of the problem that we have in communicating about things is that we don't have the words; we don't have the stories. And sometimes we have different words for the same thing. Other times the reverse can happen: we might think we're talking about the same things, but actually we're talking about different things. That can make us angry, because we think the other person is wrong, but we are talking about different things.

Are we still defining the language, given than some journalists approach innovation from a business perspective while others come from a technology background?

Business people, tech people and politicians often have different words for the same things. These people traditionally read different types of news. Technology people tend to look at technology media, which might not cover the business side. Businesspeople might look at stories about tech stocks and the quarterly reports of listed companies, but they are not so concerned with what happens before that. And we know that politics news tends not to go into too much detail on technology.

So what I think we need is simple stories explaining how these things hang together, so that anybody with any interest can read and understand how new technologies, business issues and policies come together. If we can do that, we can generate a common language.

Given the investment in innovation, is there a democratic responsibility for the media to follow the money and see how well public money is being spent?

Well that's true. But as well as looking at the money going in, it's interesting to look at what comes out of it, and I think you'll find innovation creates a lot of value for society. Often the story comes to us at a pretty late stage.

One good example is global warming. Through the hard work of Al Gore and others, they broke the story. Of course, global warming didn't start when Al Gore made his movie – but he broke the story, and since then everyone has been telling that story.

Very often the story is "what a catastrophe", "we're all going to die", "how can we use less oil?," and so on. The issue is what ideas are out there to solve global warming and which have the best chance of succeeding. And which people and organisations are betting on the various alternatives and why? We want to be able to discuss not just the problems, but also to have collecting dialogue on solving problems.

Are traditional newsrooms equipped to cover innovation?

Journalism is no different to other professions and organisations in society. Large organisations tend to separate reality into different sections. So in media, there is usually somebody who takes care of science reporting and another guy who looks after business reporting. If we have that kind of partitioning, then the science journalist tries to avoid business, because it's not his beat, and the business journalist ignores science.

That works well in a world where science and business are separated, but today, where innovation is becoming a driving force in the economy, these things are closely linked. We have to either partition things differently or find ways of working together to write innovation stories.

One example would be medical research. Those stories used to be about ground-breaking research on new medicines. Nowadays, so much of the money is in the pharma industry that they are affecting the direction of basic research, making it very difficult to separate those issues. If you want to understand what is happening in basic research, you have to know what the pharma companies are doing. And if you want to know about the pharmaceutical industry, you actually have to understand a little about the rules governing how they have new medicines accepted. That brings you into politics, and leads you into issues like intellectual property management. So you try to decide which elements are most important for the story you want to tell.

An article about AIDS medications could bring in intellectual property issues, conflict between people dying in poor countries and research into new medicines. So it becomes a complex issue, and you can't just say "that's not my table I'm not going to report on it" – you have to go where the issue is going.

Is there an issue about how journalists are trained?

It certainly makes sense to have training on how to report on innovation. It is also very important to discuss what such training should look like. It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation. You want to start something new and people ask for the instruction book, but there can be no instructions, because it's something new.

With innovation journalism, there are a number of journalists working on various different publications labelling themselves in different ways – some are tech, some are business – we have to somehow gather together all that knowledge and examine good ways to cover innovation and the problems that arise. Then we can bring them together under one umbrella and have good courses in innovation journalism.

How does innovation influence journalism?

When I was a journalist many years ago, it was a non-issue. The Internet was coming into newsrooms but I can tell you that publishing houses were not very interested in how to use it. They were more interested in what types of news to write and whether to make a new publication – on paper – about this emerging technology. That was their business model. Nowadays when you talk to top executives they don't really want to talk about content that much any more. They are talking about whether to have a Twitter feed and how to use social networks – these are the big management questions today.

It reminds me a little bit of the dotcom era when all companies were supposed to have their own website. At that time, it didn't even matter what kind of company we were talking about, the feeling was that any and every company would have a site. It's now about having the perfect medium, but we have to look at how to find good combinations of ways of communicating while thinking about what we are communicating. If we don't, there won't be business, so we need to build an innovation system around journalism. Journalism can be continuously innovative and always thinking about its next product.

How does journalism influence innovation?

Journalism hasn't been very much focused on as a topic in the innovation world either. They haven't seen journalism as a stakeholder in innovation, but journalism affects society. It's agenda setting. We have to take this into account and see the positive potential in this. Most people wouldn't want to see democracy without independent journalism. Society as a whole has a shared interest in giving journalism a role in innovation.

You are working on innovation journalism projects in developing countries. How can innovation journalism help?

Since the end of the 1990s, aid to poor countries has developed. Earlier aid was essentially based on giving food to people who are hungry and then helping them build factories to produce the thing they need. That was the traditional model. At the end of the 90s, the need for competitive economic systems became more prominent. Countries need not only a factory that makes shoes, they need the whole system of stakeholders around shoes in order to have a healthy shoe industry.

How do we make that happen? Well, it becomes much more complex than the traditional aid model. Economic development has started embracing this and almost all aid agencies are now doing this. So we say if you want a competitive economy system, it has to be able to innovate. Then of course these countries need journalists who know how to cover this so that it gets into society and the public debate.

If you're trying to build a competitive economic system in a country and it's not in the news, then it's just not going to be a part of society. What aid agencies are doing is sponsoring journalists from countries where they are developing the economy, can spend time in Silicon Valley, and work in newsrooms where they learn how to report on an innovation-driven economic system.

They can then apply this experience and understanding in their own countries. They can also provide a critique of the direction in which it is developing. It has resulted in Pakistani journalists developing an innovation journalism centre. Pakistan has the largest cellphone growth in the world right now, so it's an interesting market. They have taken in Swedish journalists who are used to covering Ericsson, and this has helped coverage.