



# Northern California Science Writers Association

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## Innovation Journalism panel

By Andreas Von Bubnoff

What is innovation journalism?

If you don't know you're not alone, and you might even already be doing it, said Exploratorium producer and NCSWA president Mary Miller when she introduced the panel on innovation journalism.

Miller said even some members of the panel practiced innovation journalism without knowing what it was called.

The person who perhaps knew best was panel chair and moderator David Nordfors. Nordfors directs a fellowship program in innovation journalism which, he said, gives Swedish innovation journalists working experience at major U. S. media outlets.

"Innovation journalism is the aggregation of science and technology journalism with business journalism and perhaps also political journalism," said Nordfors, who is currently a visiting scholar at Stanford University.

Innovation is not just about inventions but includes their introduction into the market, he said. Science and technology journalists usually cover inventions, whereas innovation journalists cover the marketing aspects as well.

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Nordfors said there is a demand for innovation journalism, because "there are a lot of people who earn their livings in technology and innovation."

It is more important than ever to cover innovation because it has become a core activity in industry, and it is happening faster than ever before, he said.

"Today products have lifetimes of maybe one to two years," Nordfors said, noting that the world needs innovation journalists so it can stay abreast of the changes.

For example, he said, the Swedish company Ericsson cut 50 percent of its workforce and of its research and development branch two years ago. Business journalists reported that the company was doing well because of the layoffs, whereas technology journalists wrote that the company had cut its research activities.

But nobody, Nordfors said, wrote about what the changes would mean for Ericsson's future.

"I start wondering, what's going to happen with Ericsson?" he said. "Well, nobody writes about this."

Nordfors said business and technology sections in newspapers need to collaborate more -- and overcome rivalries between section editors, if necessary -- to cover innovation.

Panelist Wade Roush, senior editor and West Coast bureau chief of Technology Review, talked about what it takes to become an innovation journalist, using his own career path as an example.

"It's helpful to have a varied background if you are trying to get into this hybrid field of technology and business journalism," he said.

Roush said he had been a college newspaper writer, graduate student in history of technology and science writer at Science. He said he had also worked in the dot-com world, for a company that made e-book reading devices.

He said Technology Review, an innovation journalism magazine, sometimes has problems making it clear to readers and advertisers that innovation journalism is a field of its own.

"Half of the people ask if Technology Review is a technology magazine like Discovery, the other half asks if we are a business magazine like Fortune," he said. "We are somewhere in between."

The magazine's biggest challenge, Roush said, is to create a niche for itself and to make "ad agency people understand what that niche is all about and that they really can reach their readers that way."

Roush said the magazine's aim is to become a must-read for companies' top-level executives.

Panelist John Joss, a science and technology writer and book author, agreed with Nordfors that the innovation cycle is accelerating, making the task for innovation journalists more difficult than ever.

"Ninety-five percent of all scientists and engineers that ever lived are working today," Joss said. "In each of these technologies, the levels of complexity are absolutely devastating."

To succeed as an innovation journalist, Joss said, writers must meet the challenge of explaining this complexity to the public.

"All of you must have an impeccable command of the language and absolutely flawless communication skills," he said. "Every hour you write takes five hours to edit to get it right."

Joss said it also helps to have friends who will give honest criticism on articles, and to have good contacts "who believe in you and you in them."

Panelist Tom Abate, business reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle, advocated writing every day.

"If I were where you are now, I would be blogging," he said. Abate said everybody has expertise in something and should use that to

carve out a specialty area, which could later lead to writing assignments.

"If you are identifying yourself as an expert in areas that interest you," he said, "the people who are interested in what you are purveying will find you."

The panel also briefly discussed the difficulties in getting the kind of information innovation journalists are looking for: leads on technological advances.

Joss said Internet search engines often don't find this type of information because it is hidden.

"If you are working on a major advance in an important technological area, you don't want anybody to know about it until it is developed and ready to go to market and bulletproof," he said.

Miller said to find this kind of information, it can help to look at patent applications and government reports.

For more on these topics, David Nordfors invited everyone interested to attend an innovation journalism conference taking place at Stanford University April 4-6, 2005.

As challenging as it may be to work as an innovation journalist, giving it a try could pay off. Miller said she organized the panel because she noted that the opportunities for straight science reporting in newspapers and magazines were dwindling.

"We needed to address ways in which you can still write about science but have it be actually sold," she said.

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