

*An expert network created in Sweden becomes a cost-effective testing ground for journalists worldwide to use Internet-enabled services for building a base of knowledge, experience, and contacts.*

## INTRODUCING A COUNTRY TO INTERNET-ENABLED EXPERT NETWORKS

In 1995, police arrest a drunken man, Osmo Vallo, in a small town in Sweden. Witnesses report the police used force to detain him. Vallo gets injured and dies from cardiac arrest while in police custody. The forensic pathologists cannot determine the cause of death; the police officers involved are fined for inducing bodily injuries. The case is closed.

In 1996 a Swedish investigative television show, "Striptease," takes a closer look at the case. It concludes the forensic investigation is unsatisfactory and that external experts should examine the facts more deeply. The show's researcher, Hannes Råstam, decides to tap the Internet, a then novel and untested tool among Swedish journalists. He receives help from the New York-based ProfNet expert network, which puts him in touch with Michel Baden, a renowned forensic pathologist who investigated the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, among others. Baden confirms suspicions and supplies new facts that are broadcast on

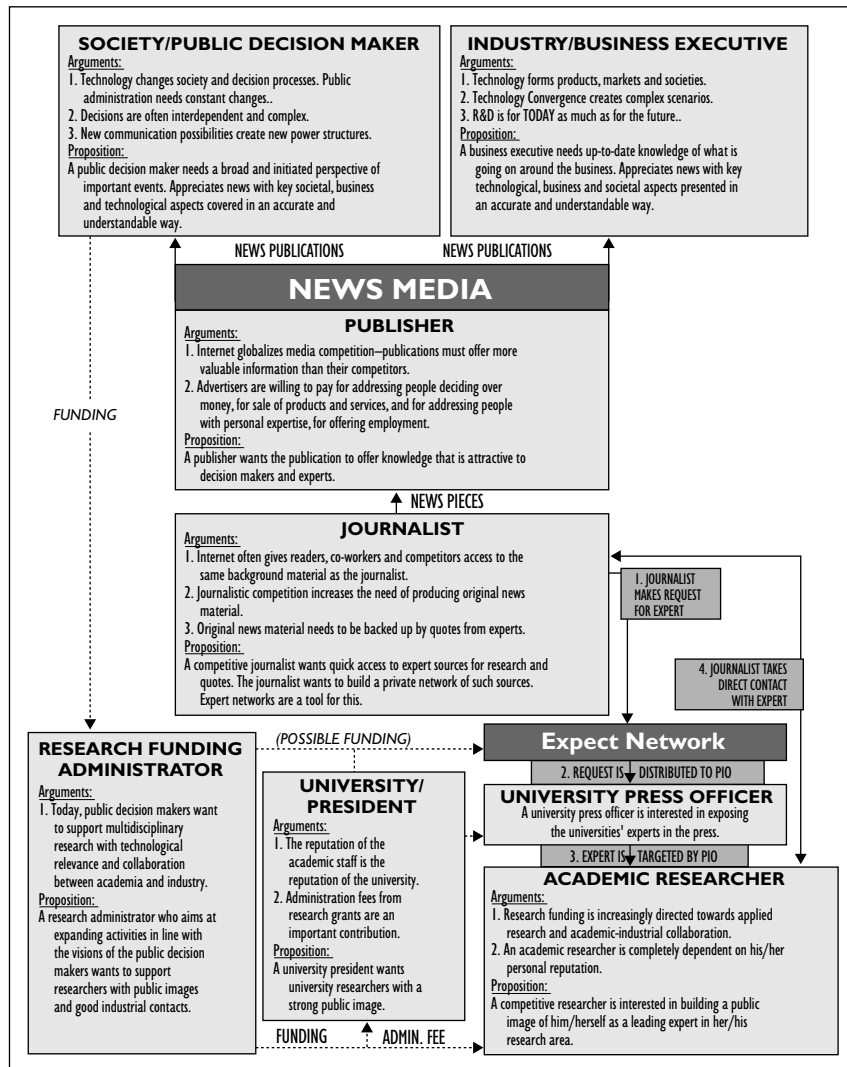
Swedish TV. The Vallo case is reopened.

Several projects depicting the advancement of computer-assisted reporting, particularly how journalists use relational databases and the Internet, were sponsored by the Swedish Foundation for Knowledge and Competence Development (the KK Foundation) from 1995–1998. The KK Foundation created a pilot project in 1996 in which a mobile Internet-connected network of laptop computers was installed in select newsrooms and used to train journalists how to use the Internet for journalistic research. Most of the participating reporters embraced the new tools immediately and enthusiastically [3].

In 1996 the KK Foundation initiated INFOPAC, a communication training package offered to scientists of research projects receiving financial support [4]. While analyzing the results of these projects, we identified a need for an interface supporting new contacts between journalists and academic expertise in Sweden.

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**Figure 1. An appreciated expert network will be self-reinforcing, driven by the interacting self-interests of the necessary players. This interaction may form several societal “attractors,” such as the one suggested here. The flow of public funding to academia is indicated by arrows with broken lines, the flow of information by arrows with unbroken lines. The Expert Network loop connects journalists with experts and enhances the interaction between society and academic research, between funding and public understanding of science.**

## A Growing Need for Expert Networks

*Wisdom deficit.* Different sciences and technologies are converging. The Internet is expanding human and computer networks. In this rapidly changing complex environment, it is difficult for professionals to stay above the mountainous volumes of information. Indeed, their problem is finding the needle in the haystack.

*Knowledge competition.* Hypertext, multimedia, and interactivity via the Internet offer publishers possibilities for deeper coverage than print can offer. Once the Internet has become the leading distribution channel for news, we can expect intensified knowledge competition between publishers. A good news site will not only offer news in a concise and effective way, it will also provide an extensive research library.

*The journalistic mission.* Four out of five Swedes read a morning newspaper. The average Swede devotes about six hours a day to media consumption

including newspapers, magazines, books, radio, TV, CDs, video, and various Internet-distributed content, according to 2002 statistics [2]. Naturally, most people don't have the time to personally research the topics of greatest interest to them; they rely largely on information produced by journalists.

Journalists are key players in society's knowledge dissemination, reaching thousands or even millions of readers and viewers. Thus, a journalist's level of understanding may have a corresponding impact on the level of insight in public debate.

## Random Gurus

General news reporters must be able to grasp news subjects quickly. Their ability to select topics and produce a credible and informative report depends on their access to experts.

With deadlines constantly looming, journalists often encounter topics for which they have limited experience, typically using published reports by other journalists and media to identify experts. For this

reason we often see the same specialists and scientists appearing regularly; a situation that can elevate them to “public guru” status. Meanwhile, other experts with equal acclaim, and perhaps different viewpoints, may go unnoticed. This lack of exposed expertise might cloud public debate and decision making. Quick and effective tools for finding experts in the early stages of developing news topics can increase the variety of experts, and thus, perspectives.

### Expert Networks

Society today has an inherent need for expert networks and an appreciated expert network will be self-reinforcing, driven by the interacting self-interests of the necessary players, as illustrated in Figure 1. These networks are organized either as centralized or decentralized brokerages. Invariably, reporters use all features free of charge. The expert networks and alerting services mentioned here are financed with fees from the participating universities and research labs, sponsor contributions, and grants from research foundations, sometimes with additional support from the government and corporate spheres.

Centralized expert brokerages build on a centrally administered database of cataloged and categorized scientists. The journalist calls an adviser who searches the database and makes further inquiries within the network. Within hours, the adviser is often able to deliver a select choice of experts willing to talk to the reporter.

The Media Resource Service (MRS; [www.media-source.org](http://www.media-source.org)) was launched 1980 by the Scientists’ Institute for Public Information (SIPI) in New York in the wake of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. Offering a 1-800 number to querying reporters, MRS was the first service to mediate contacts between journalists and academically recognized experts. Today, the MRS database boasts more than 30,000 experts, all associated by invitation and reference only.

The expert service spawned the smaller London-based MRS ([www.novartisfound.demon.co.uk/mrs/MRSwelcome.htm](http://www.novartisfound.demon.co.uk/mrs/MRSwelcome.htm)) in 1985, whose membership today features about 5,000 scientists, mainly from the U.K., France, and Germany. In 1991, the French Academy of Science founded Science Contact, which currently features about 2,000 noted French scientists.

Reporters email queries, indicating deadlines and other particulars to a central operator, who forwards them to others who will find the experts.

ProfNet is the world’s largest decentralized expert brokerage. The service was founded in 1992 at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and is

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now a subsidiary of PR Newswire, a global distributor of news content for both the private and public sectors. ProfNet typically transmits between 500 and 700 reporters’ queries weekly to the 10,000 information officers who subscribe to the service on behalf of 4,000 organizations. With new personalization technology, ProfNet also offers reporters a database in which reporters may search for both experts and information officers by keyword.

The service collects and specifies queries before distributing them by email to the subscribing public information officers (PIOs). The PIOs choose which queries they wish to address, and present sources directly to the querying journalist.

Figure 2. The project's time line.

ProfNet inspired the founders behind Universities UK's ExpertNet, launched in 1994, and the Experten Makler/Informationsdienst Wissenschaft (IDW), founded in 1995 in Germany.

IDW uses a database for automatically matching and sending reporters' queries to the IDW-subscribing universities with suitable scientific profiles. While most of the clerical tasks are automated, the operator in charge gives personal support to reporters and PIOs.

News and alerting services offer accredited science journalists embargoed access to important unpublished scientific articles and research results *before* they are made public. This allows reporters and newsrooms to cover scientific results as they are officially released.

EurekAlert! ([www.eurekalert.org](http://www.eurekalert.org)) was founded in 1996 by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), publisher of *Science* magazine. The corresponding European service AlphaGalileo ([www.alpha-galileo.org](http://www.alpha-galileo.org)) was launched a year later by the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS).

EurekAlert! and AlphaGalileo typically distribute 10–20 daily releases to subscribing journalists from member universities and peer-review magazines.

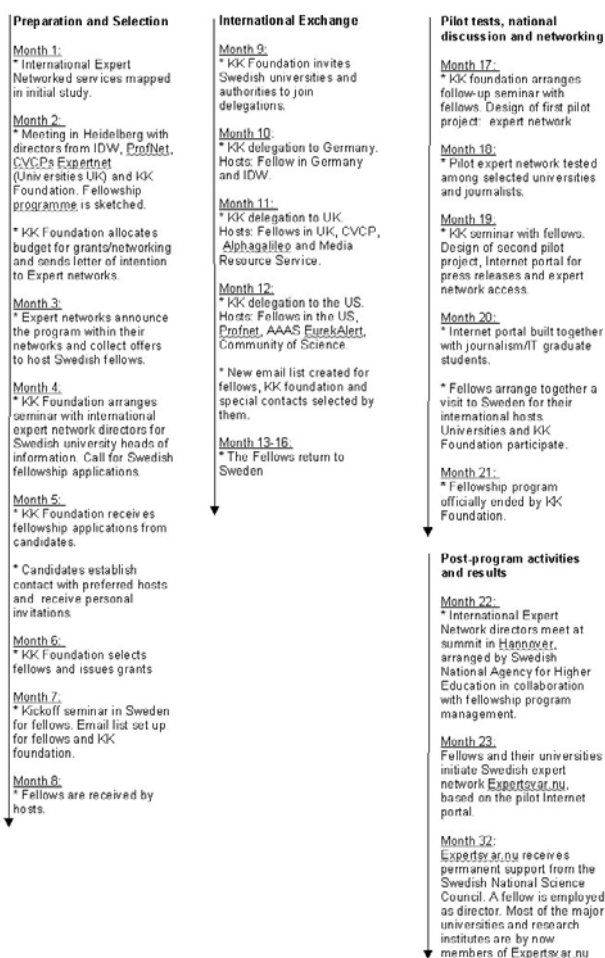
Centralized expert brokerages have been around for two decades, but it is only with the decentralized networks on the Internet that expert brokerage has become widespread.

An analysis of how reporters use German, U.K., and U.S. expert networks suggests a majority of the users constitute a journalistic elite—that is, reporters who spend more time on research and analysis [1]. Tabloid and commercial TV reporters generally spend less time on research and are infrequent users of all expert networks.

## Introducing Sweden to Expert Networks

The objective of the KK Foundation was to build a critical mass within a community of researchers and PIOs at a number of Swedish universities by helping them gain access to the necessary skills, contacts, and academic support to set up expert network activities in Sweden.

To move knowledge we moved people, as inspired by postdoctoral fellowship programs. We launched scholarships sponsoring six-month stints in the operation of the major international expert



brokerages. To this we added community building, networking, marketing, as well as pilot projects for testing activities in Sweden.<sup>1</sup>

The KK Foundation had no intention of taking on the responsibility to form a Swedish expert network; it was left up to the fellows to initiate and spearhead any permanent expert network.

The fellows participated primarily as individuals, rather than representatives of their universities. Knowledge and creativity belongs to individuals and a successful organization manages to identify and support their creative abilities for the benefit of the organization. Although support from their institutions was critical, once the fellows were admitted into the program their universities had no formal right to influence their activities.

The program lasted almost two years and was composed of three phases:

<sup>1</sup>Background material relating to the present work is available at [www.nordfors.com/expertnets](http://www.nordfors.com/expertnets)

- Preparations and selection processes (8 months);
- International exchange for build-up of fellows' knowledge, skills, and networks (8 months); and
- Pilot tests, national discussion, and networking (6 months).

A time line of pertinent activities is presented in Figure 2.

The KK Foundation allocated 2.5M SEK (U.S. \$250K) for the program. Swedish university staffers were invited to apply for the fellowships. The KK Foundation pledged to pay all expenses for admitted fellows during the six months abroad. In return, the foundation demanded the universities agreed to grant their fellows sufficient time to find ways to use and implement their experiences during the six months following their return. Nine candidates applied for fellowship: five press officers, three researchers, and a lecturer from a department of journalism.

Simultaneously, a letter stating the intention to sponsor a number of fellows to study expert networks abroad was sent to participating expert networks. ProfNet, IDW, and Universities UK distributed this letter to their member universities, and called for written invitations from those who wished to host a Swedish fellow. As a result, senior public information officers at 21 German, U.K., and U.S. universities opened their doors, and the IDW and ProfNet headquarters added two more invitations.

The applicants were handed the list of invitations from expert networks and universities, and were asked to make contacts and produce a personal invitation from a host. Thus all hosts and fellows who ended up working together had personally selected each other. All nine applicants were granted scholarships by the KK Foundation.

Before going abroad, the fellows met for a two-day kickoff seminar where an email list was established. This list was the heart of the emerging community including the fellows and the project management during the following year of activities.

The KK Foundation then invited the heads of information of the Swedish universities and the National Agency for Higher Education to participate in delegations to visit them in Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. The fellows organized and hosted the visits. The university heads of information from Sweden met not only their counterparts in the other countries, but also leaders of ProfNet, IDW, Universities UK, and some other influential expert networks, such as AAAS Eurekalert, Community of Science (COS; [www.cos.com](http://www.cos.com)), MRS, and Alpha-

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Galileo. The email list was expanded to include outside supporters as well.

The KK Foundation also issued an additional grant, offering each fellow to invite a host of their own choice to visit them later in Sweden.

Shortly after returning to Sweden the fellows met to select two services which were considered crucial for a Swedish expert network: finding experts for journalists and publishing press releases on the Internet. They set up pilot tests, beginning with the expert brokerage. One of the fellows was selected to lead the pilot test and work as the central node of the expert network. Seven universities participated along with journalists from five editorial desks, freelance

journalists, and a master class of journalism at the Stockholm University. Journalists from four other editorial staffs joined the pilot test upon its onset. In two weeks the network of fellows received 59 queries from journalists, delivering 80 responses.

In the second pilot test, a Web portal with a search engine was constructed for press releases from participating universities. The portal was also equipped with an entrance to the expert brokerage service and possibilities for journalists and press officers to register as members of the service. The portal was designed and implemented in collaboration between the fellows and Web-programming graduate students at the Stockholm College of Journalism.

The KK Foundation left the program after the pilot tests.

## Results and Conclusion

The Swedish expert brokerage and alerting service Expertsvar ([www.expertsvar.nu](http://www.expertsvar.nu)) was launched in August 2000. Tina Zethraeus, one of the fellows and press officer at Uppsala University, was appointed coordinator of the service. Nine months later Expertsvar received permanent backing from the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet).

By mid-2001, 20 Swedish research institutes had been connected to Expertsvar, including all major universities. There were 800 subscribing journalists and those subscriptions increased steadily (22% per month) with word of mouth as its only marketing tool.

A third of the subscribing journalists had posted at least one request for expertise. Some 588 queries from Swedish journalists along with a smaller but unknown number of queries from foreign reporters had been distributed to and answered by the Swedish member universities. Every query had typically generated 1–4 qualified responses. Moreover, 62 requests were forwarded to IDW and ProfNet. In addition, more than 400 press releases had been distributed by email to subscribing journalists, and made available to the public via the Web site of Expertsvar.<sup>2</sup>

The project also brought ProfNet, Expertnet, and IDW even closer together. The lively communications between the fellows, the hosts, and the project management spurred discussions about cooperation and coordination of services, while the delegations and conferences offered meeting opportunities. Today, ProfNet, Expertnet, IDW, and Expertsvar are offering users cross-continental decentralized expert searches, supported by more than 15,000 press and

information officers in the U.S. and Europe.

Expertsvar has also brought the PIOs of Swedish universities in closer contact with each other.

It was of crucial importance that the same individuals represented their respective organization throughout the program. The fellows and the project management had full control over the program and respective budgets. Otherwise the project would have most likely failed.

For obvious reasons, it was of vital importance to have experienced journalists among the fellows as well as within the project management.

Another vital part of the project was the listserv and the mailing list with the fellows and the project management. The email list formed the community that developed into Expertsvar. It also served as a contact between the participating expert networks.

The method presented here can be applied in any country that aims to facilitate increased interactions between the news media and its academic/research community. **C**

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Contributing to this article prior to his death was Barry Jackson, founder of Universities UK's ExpertNet.

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<sup>2</sup>Tina Zethraeus, Expertsvar. Private communication July 2001.