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Pitfalls of Attention Work in the Innovation Ecosystem

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Pitfalls of Attention Work in the Innovation Ecosystem

1 The innovation Ecosystem

Innovation is an organic process that is difficult to control. It is very much related to and dependent on things around it, its growing environment. In fact, innovation requires an ecosystem to support its birth¹. Others speak of an innovation system² that is maintained by the interaction between people, enterprises and institutions. The players in the innovation ecosystem can be described as “attention workers,” as their primary goal is to broker attention.

Innovation journalism is an important area of attention work. According to the founding father of the very concept, Dr. David Nordfors, it is journalism about innovations and innovation ecosystems.³ For example, Kauhanen and Noppari have argued for a broader definition of the concept of innovation journalism, calling it ‘journalism of change’ and ‘future work’.⁴ After all of this, we will argue for the original ‘Nordforsian’ definition, because of its simplicity and usefulness.

It is also crucial to realize that in the 20th century, the United States dominated the world in innovation ecosystems. Now, however, other countries are placing innovation at the top of their national agendas, from China and Singapore to Finland and Chile. According to Kao, four trends are now ushering in an era of global innovation: the rise of innovation as a currency of global competition, the global war for talent, innovation as a national agenda and the power of networks.⁵

Silicon Valley (California, USA) has developed an established innovation ecosystem where the different players come together to enable innovation. Its success greatly depends on collaboration between the different attention workers. This paper focuses on the attention exchange and pitfalls of attention work among in Silicon Valley. The focus is on pitfalls, as acknowledging and understanding the pitfalls could lead to avoiding them and result in improved innovation. A pitfall can

¹ Estrin, J. (2009) *Closing the Innovation Gap. Reigniting the spark of creativity in a global economy.* McGrawHill: San Francisco.

² Lundvall B.-Å. (1985) ‘Product innovation and user-producer interaction, industrial development’, Research Series 31, Aalborg; Aalborg University Press.

³ Nordfors, David (2004) *The Concept of Innovation Journalism and a programme for developing it.* Innovation Journalism. Vol 1, no 1., p 1-12.

⁴ Kauhanen, Erkki and Noppari, Elina 2007. *Innovation, Journalism and Future. Final Report of the Research project Innovation Journalism in Finland.* Technology review. 200/2007. Tekes, Helsinki.

⁵ Kao, John. (2009) *Tapping the World’s Innovation Hot Spots.* Harvard Business Review. March 2009. <http://hbr.harvardbusiness.org/2009/03/tapping-the-worlds-innovation-hot-spots/es>

be defined as a potential misstep that may result in a negative outcome “an unforeseen or unexpected or surprising difficulty.”⁶ In this paper we understand it to refer to missteps by attention workers that may cause an innovation to be misinterpreted or misrepresented, and for that incorrect or incomplete information to be circulated and incorporated into the public’s understanding of that innovation or market.

2 Attention Workers

It has been suggested that we are entering into an “attention economy”⁷ where the object of consumption shifts from goods and services to attention. Attention is becoming the currency of businesses and individuals, and “understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success”⁸.

The attention economy is related to the digitalization of the media, and the increasing influence of the Internet. But according to the Factiva news archive, placing a value on attention is not a new phenomenon. In fact, *Business Week* stated in its March 1995 cover story: “Bits and bytes are virtually unlimited, but there are still only 24 hours in a day⁹.” It’s interesting that the mainstream media today uses the term “attention economy” carefully, and often set off by quotation marks.¹⁰

In the attention economy, reputation plays an important role¹¹ as participants choose whom to deal with and build their own reputation as they interact¹². It can also be argued that attention economy consists of “attention workers.” Attention workers are “key players in the innovation communication system; their main aim

⁶ WordNet, Cognitive Science Laboratory, Princeton University, cited May 15th 2009, Available Online: <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=pitfall>

⁷ Simon, H. A. (1971), ‘Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World’, The Johns Hopkins Press; Simon, H. A. (1996), *The Sciences of the Artificial* (3rd ed.), The MIT Press: Cambridge MA; Davenport, T. H. & J. C. Beck (2001), *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Harvard Business School Press.

⁸ Davenport, T. H. & J. C. Beck (2001), *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Harvard Business School Press, p. 3.

⁹ Gross, Neil & Coy, Peter. (1995) The technology paradox. How companies can thrive as prices dive. *Business Week*. 6.3.1995.

¹⁰ See for example Stern, Stefan. (2009) Your attention, please, I need you to focus on this now. *Financial Times*. 6.1.2009.

¹¹ Luoma-aho, V. (2005) *Faith-holders as Social Capital of Finnish Public Organizations*. Academic Dissertation. Studies in Humanities 42, University of Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä.

¹² Hunt, T. (2009). *The Whuffie Factor. Using the Power of Social Networks to Build Your Business*, Crown Business: New York, NY.

is to generate and trade attention, and their success is measured in the value of the attention they control”¹³. Attention workers include professions such as journalism, public relations, lobbying, marketing, advertising, distribution and sales.

However, it is evident that because of the digitalization of the media, the role of the audience, or citizens, has also changed dramatically, becoming more dynamic and interactive. Actually, we are all capable of creating new media outlets with the help of free social media services like Blogger, Twitter and Facebook. The concept of attention workers highlights the current state: in a way, we can all easily act as attention workers, or in other words, citizen journalists.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, the digital attention economy has created new pressures for all of its aforementioned attention workers, but especially for journalists. The current global economic downturn and technological change in ICT has hit traditional journalism outlets particularly hard, prompting thousands of layoffs and cutbacks in the U.S. and elsewhere.¹⁵ Traditionally, newspapers have been the de facto source of original reporting in communities and societies. However, with a diminishing newspaper press corps, new news production models are needed and being tested.¹⁶

3 The Push/Pull of PR & Journalism

The traditional approach to the relationship between journalism and PR is slightly controversial, as the goals of the two professions are seen as opposing. To understand the similarities and differences between journalism and public relations, it is helpful to do a short comparison of the ethical codes of journalists and public relations professionals.¹⁷

¹³ Nordfors, D (2006) PR and the Innovation Communication System, *Innovation Journalism*, 3(5), Oct 25, p. 8.

¹⁴ Gillmor, Dan. (2004) *We the Media. Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. O’Reilly Sebastopol, CA; Allan, Stuart. (2006) *Online News. Journalism and the Internet*. Open University Press, Berkshire UK, 121–167; Hermes, Joke. (2006) *Citizenship in the Age of the Internet*. *European Journal of Communication*. Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi. Vol 21 (3): 295–309; Beckett, Charlie. (2008) *SuperMedia. Saving Journalism So It Can Save The World*. Blackwell, Oxford; Currah, Andrew. (2009) *What’s Happening to Our News. An investigation into the likely impact of the digital revolution on the economics of news publishing in the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford.

¹⁵ Singer, Jane B. 2003. Who are these guys? The online challenge to the notion of journalistic professionalism. *Journalism*. Sage. London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi. Vol. 4 (2). 139–163.

¹⁶ See for example: [Digg](#), [GlobalPost](#), [Google News](#), [MinnPost](#), [Newser](#), [Newsvine](#), [Politico](#), [ProPublica](#), [Reddit](#), [Spot.us](#), [TambaBay/St. Petersburg Times](#), [The Guardian \(UK\)](#), [The Huffington Post](#) and [Voice of San Diego](#).

¹⁷ Salter, Lee. (2005) The communicative structures of journalism and public relations. *Journalism*. Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi. Vol 6.(1): 90–106.

It can be argued that the very core of the journalistic profession is to be critical towards all sources, to be independent in story selection and to pursue neutrality (objectivity) in reporting. By acting according to these ethical principles, knowledgeable journalists contribute a critical and skeptical voice to the communication systems of innovation.

According to the PRSA codes of ethics, public relations professionals are to enable the free flow and disclosure of information¹⁸. Values such as honesty, fairness and expertise are to guide the work of PR professionals. PR represents a source in the same way that journalism represents readers, yet both broker attention. When compared, the ethical codes of both professions are very similar in their content.

From the journalistic point of view, the role of PR professionals should be more of an assistant than an agenda-setter or boss. But because of the ongoing revolution in the news industry, especially the downsizing of newsroom staffs and the proliferation of small but growing online-only news organizations (blogs), it seems likely that PR professionals will play a more pivotal role in influencing story topics and supplying sources for journalists.

In 2005, Lee Salter from the University of West of England observed, “it is becoming increasingly common in universities for journalism and public relations to be considered as partner subjects”¹⁹. Later, business reporter John Lloyd from the *Financial Times* wrote:

“Public relations and journalism do not inhabit separate worlds; in particular, the relationship between them is not that of sleazy liars seeking to seduce seekers after truth. Truth does not reside on one side only. Standards are not the monopoly of one and unknown to the other. Journalism cannot understand itself unless it understands what public relations has done to it; how murky and grubby the relationship can become, with the connivance of both, and how the relationship might work to the benefit of citizens who should be told something like the truth.”²⁰

On the other hand, the award-winning reporter Nick Davies from *The Guardian* has argued in his book *Flat Earth News* (2009) that, under new pressures, traditional journalism has lost its power and independence and “reporters are reduced to ‘churnalism,’ to the passive processing of material which overwhelmingly tends to be supplied for them by outsiders, particularly wire agencies and PR.”²¹ According to Davies, in a Cardiff University study, researchers found that 60 percent of stories in the British quality press (*The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Daily Mail*) (N=2207) consisted wholly or mainly of wire copy and/or PR material, and a

¹⁸ PRSACodes of ethics, Available online: www.prssa.org/.../codeofethics.pdf

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lloyd, J. (2006) ‘The truth about Spin’, *Financial Times* online, April 21, 2006; available online: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/b899de88-d03a-11da-b160-0000779e2340.html>

²¹ Davies, Nick. (2009) *Flat Earth News*. Vintage Books, London, p. 73.

further 20 percent contained clear elements of wire copy and/or PR. Journalists were unsure of the source of 8 percent of stories, and only 12 percent were generated by the reporters, themselves.²²

The PR industry started to boom in the 1980s, just as journalists began losing their jobs, and many of the jobless journalists crossed over into PR. Britain now has more PR professionals (47,800) than journalists (45,000). Similarly, in the United States, PR has expanded to fill the information void.²³

Some suggest that where public relations may benefit from journalism, journalism does not benefit from public relations²⁴. This view is rather narrow, but the tension between journalist and PR professionals is still evident. A late Reuters Institute report explains the many problems that result because of a “Darwinistic struggle for media attention,” and “the rise of positive overtones of PR.” The report emphasized the dangers to public health posed by sensationalized, PR-driven and unsubstantiated reporting.²⁵

We will argue that in the attention economy, and because of the current downturn, these two professions are becoming more alike than ever. All innovation communicators and attention workers share a common goal: to spread the most relevant information regarding innovations as accurately as possible. Both are attention workers and as such, represent the interests of specific groups. Journalists represent their readers, and PR professionals represent their clients, or the organization. The attention economy requires input from both.

We will examine this more in detail through the prism of the innovation ecosystem of Silicon Valley. We focus on pitfalls of attention work, as by understanding those areas most in need of development can we best improve the innovation economy.

4 Attention Pitfalls

The data reported here was collected from 20 thematic interviews with journalists, analysts, entrepreneurs, investors and PR practitioners in Silicon Valley in fall of 2008. The interviewees were chosen to broadly represent the reality of Silicon Valley; some represented major legacy news outlets (eg. *The New York Times*), while others represented smaller, newer online media outlets (eg. Greentech Media) still others are freelancers. Those in PR varied from employees at larger agencies (eg. Antenna PR) to smaller firms (eg. Rocketscience) and in-house PR

²² Ibid., p. 52.

²³ Ibid., p. 85, 97.

²⁴ Salter, Lee. (2005) *The communicative structures of journalism and public relations*. Journalism. Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi. Vol 6.(1): 105.

²⁵ Currah, Andrew. (2009) *What’s Happening to Our News*. An investigation into the likely impact of the digital revolution on the economics of news publishing in the UK. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford, 137–138.

departments (SunDisk). Gender was not equally distributed, as only four of the 20 interviewees were women. The respondents had an average of 19.4 years of experience in the communications sector, with individual experience ranging from 9 to 45 years. The respondents had spent an average of 23.4 years in Silicon Valley, ranging from 1 year to 59 years. All the respondents were active in communications in the Valley at the time of their interview.

The data presented here consists of interviewees' answers to the questions "what are the most common pitfalls for reporting on innovation?" and "what are the most common pitfalls for doing PR for innovations?" Answers to the questions "what are the current journalism trends in Silicon Valley?" "what are the current PR trends in Silicon Valley?" and "is there trust between these professions?" were also used. Not all interviewees felt they could answer every question. This places limitations on the generalization of the data, but as the data reflects the views of diverse players, both in size and focus, it can be taken as a snapshot of the current state.

4.1 Pitfalls for Journalists

When asked about the pitfalls for reporting on innovation, almost all those interviewed talked about the migration of major media sources from print to online, and its implications for reporting. "There's a lot of evolution going on. I think we're in transition. It's not great yet anywhere." What audiences want is unclear, and the way audiences receive information about innovations from news sources is changing. The new formats also challenge the in-depth reporting often required for good innovation stories. As one journalist said, "how do you tell stories in depth on Twitter?" (each Twitter transmission, or "tweet" has a limit of 140 characters). The journalist's role as filter or curator for information is increasingly being done by news aggregation sites that rely on search algorithms to pick relevant stories.

According to interviewees, one of the most common pitfalls was not *getting all the facts right*. In other words, not publishing information before facts have been checked and not having the opportunity to gather enough about the subject matter to provide proper context. Journalists linked this problem to the unrelenting speed of the news cycle: "the pitfall of pushing so fast that you don't double check, and misquoted information appears." The interviewees also noted the danger of publishing stories that have not been properly edited: "It used to be that every article was touched by four editors, but now you get stuff from bloggers at 2 am: they hit 'post' and it's out there, and even with retractions, you can't pull it back, people can still stumble back to the original post out there. There is lack of editorial control."

The interviewees also feared "*touting something that is going to fail*." One interviewee mentioned that if he covers an innovation one day, he may be contacted the following day by someone who has a better service in the same field that he didn't know about. Interviewees also noted that in the U.S., journalists tend to *overly polarize* things for the sake of injecting controversy or giving a

recognizable shape to a story, hence leading to misinterpreted scenarios. The innovation ecosystem cannot often be explained in terms of black or white thinking, especially in its earliest stages.

The second most commonly mentioned pitfall was the tendency for journalists to *believe too blindly in what they are being told about the product*. Interviewees linked this pitfall to taking shortcuts, as often, a lack of time resulted in not doing enough research. The interviewees mentioned that believing a new innovation will be really useful even before it has been tested in the marketplace can be disastrous. One interviewee mentioned that many wild claims are made, though most products don't succeed: "you're in a difficult place to make assessments, it's a super high risk thing as many things you write about do not end up right." To sum up, it's dangerous for journalists to proceed without skepticism.

Other often mentioned pitfalls related to the issues of *hype* and *time*. Interviewees talked about the "danger of being sucked into the hype and getting excited." Interviewees mentioned that personal interest in a technology or innovation may lead them down this path. "Especially if it is a new service or tech that seems good and WOW... you think it's already reality." The time related pressures seem to be related to the other pitfalls: because of time constraints, fact checking is cursory, at best, and a critical approach is pushed aside in the interest of being first to publish the information. Several interviewees pointed out that the need for real-time information makes it "hard to be more precise than the press-release," hence many stories are "just reprocessed press releases," which is evident from the canned quotes and one-sided stories.

Other pitfalls mentioned included the *lack of depth* in reporting, the *journalistic ego* that sometimes prevents using others' information, the difficulty of *finding a right nuance*, the difficulty of *writing in a way that interests readers* and the *understanding of roles* in the innovation system. The changing landscape from print to online has its dangers. As one interviewee said, "social media is not in a position to take over newsgathering. I'm very worried about this issue."

4.2 Pitfalls for PR

When asked about the pitfalls for doing PR for innovations, most interviewees mentioned the change in focus from traditional media to new media. PR practices are also changing in the process. "Everyone in PR is working really hard to figure out the new channels." Though *online* is gaining in importance, it *has not yet been understood by those paying for PR*. "So, for my view, the online has more impact than the magazine. But not every publicist would agree to that. Because the magazine is tangible, and as a publicist, you can take the magazine to the CEO and show the pictures and the article [whereas] the same article online would reach millions..."

Interviewees mentioned the understanding of *newer forms of media* as important for innovation-related PR, as well as real-time updates and a move *away from the press release*. As one journalist put it, "what's happening is that PR has opened itself to the new media, using social tools: I receive invitations through Facebook,

Twitter, I receive invitations to follow the bloggers, they widen their focus, it's not just press or bloggers, it's influencers.”

Many interviewees talked about the difficulty of *making the innovation into something that could be understood and related to* by both the press and end-users. The interviewees mentioned that PR must humanize the innovation and show how products and technologies are being used. The focus for journalists should be on how their readers' lives will be affected by the innovation. “How does it matter in their lives? What does it do and how do people use it?” Interviewees said that providing *video and images* can help, especially if the innovation is difficult to understand or describe, as is often the case during the initial launch.

A major pitfall for innovation PR seemed to be information overload, or too much detail. Most interviewees noted problems around the technical nature of many innovations. PR fails by making the innovation seem “*overly technical*” or focusing on a single feature and forgetting the bigger picture. An innovation needs “a story that is compelling and touching” to influence its adoption.

Another common pitfall is *pitching something interesting to a journalist whose interest lays elsewhere*. Moreover, the process of PR for innovation *goes on after the big introductions* and launches. One interviewee mentioned Apple as an example of good before and after-innovation PR, as they create hype, provide information about products and maintain an ongoing relationship with the end-user.

Traditionally, PR has relied on campaigns and promotions to launch something new. With that, the interviewees noted changes in recent years: “You pretty much have to now dress up as a bride hanging from the helicopter to promote a wedding site. People have seen it all. Differentiation is getting more difficult, especially in the web.” The innovation, however novel, no longer carries itself. Good PR is more essential than ever. On the other hand, the interviewees noted that extreme tricks and stunts may backfire: for example, if you do a stunt where you drive a Hummer over a flash-drive to test its resilience, every journalist will do their own tests, too, and one of them is sure to break the product.

5 Discussion and Implications

In this study we concentrated on the pitfalls of attention work in the innovation ecosystem of Silicon Valley by interviewing 20 journalists, analysts, entrepreneurs, investors and PR practitioners in the fall 2008. The major outcome of the research was that attention work has become harder for both professional groups of journalists and public relations practitioners in recent times. After observing the many difficulties in communicating the innovations and innovation ecosystems, what requires more extended examination here is the concrete advice of helping the flow of innovation information. This does not only mean new tools or new types of media, but new types of collaboration between the different attention workers.

The pitfalls for attention work seem to be pitfalls much related to understanding the new environment. In fact, they are interrelated: as the news cycle gets faster, PR

has to provide less controlled information. These new demands lead to questions of preference: Is it better to provide unchecked information early, or verified information late? At a time when editors are scarce, is reporting on innovations actually thriving, as less content gets edited? What does this do to the innovation ecosystem, where free flow of information is essential?

First, it is necessary to increase the understanding of innovations, innovation processes, and innovation ecosystems for journalists as well as PR practitioners. By combining the best from both attention worker worlds, and focusing on innovations, it is, maybe, possible to help to improve the quality and quantity of innovation journalism stories. As mentioned before, the attention economy requires both inputs.

Second, we call for a redefinition of the PR-Journalism relationship from opposition to collaboration and note the value of social capital²⁶. As all attention workers are becoming more dependent on their own reputation, the relationship between journalists and PR professionals needs to change. At the same time, the environment is more chaotic and faster paced. There are new constraints on both sides, and the real-time nature of the attention economy only increases this. Only by acting in a way that is good for their personal “whuffie”²⁷, their reputation, in the long run, can attention workers ensure their continued success. Multilayered communications tactics are needed for information to be put into a form that is digestible for various media and platforms, from blogs and videos to longer-form newspaper and magazine articles.

The faster pace also affects the job-descriptions of attention workers. As readers’ interests change and as newsrooms shrink, journalists’ beats are changing more rapidly. This makes it difficult for PR professionals to keep up, and it means they are more likely to pitch journalists unwanted information. A closer relationship between PR professionals and journalists would help both sides overcome this hurdle.

As attention decreases, focus is shifting from providing information to telling a story. This development is not “good” or “bad,” it is simply taking place. The focus on stories gives more responsibility to PR, as companies are relying more upon their public relations teams to provide a roadmap for telling their stories. The way to exchange information in these new settings, however, is more demanding for both sides. Journalists and PR professionals need to have a better dialog and focus on the issue more than their power differentials. Trust in the relationship will enable the flow of quality information, which ultimately boosts the chances of correct information about an innovation making it into the public dialog. Once that

²⁶ Bourdieu, P. “The Forms of Capital.” In *Education, Culture, Economy, Society*, edited by A. H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown & A. Stuart Wells. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997: 46-59.

²⁷ Hunt, T. (2009). *The Whuffie Factor. Using the Power of Social Networks to Build Your Business*, Crown Business: New York, NY.

information is out there, it can be built upon and developed in a way that improves the public's understanding, rather than produces confusion.

Trust and dialogue do not mean an uncritical approach or naive friendship. Journalists still need to ask the tough questions and include opposing voices and ideas about the quality or usefulness of an innovation. Similarly, PR will still need to focus on their side of the story. Trust will simply make the interaction easier and faster, helping to solve some major challenges facing the attention economy today.

What would building individual whuffie be like in practice? Whuffie consists of being nice, networked, listening, engaging and trusting²⁸: in sum, it is the track record of previous actions. Attention workers need to realize, that all their relationships affect their whuffie: the individual interactions add up to a longer timeframe. Journalists should view PR professionals as sources to be cultivated over time so that the exchange of information is not limited to when a reporter is on deadline. Just as journalists cultivate a variety of sources to ensure that they are casting a wide enough net, they should meet with and carry on a dialog with a variety of PR professionals, both at agencies and in-house. These relationships are mutually beneficial. PR helps reporters to filter information, freeing them from the fear of missing an important aspect of innovation.

Positive relationships add up to the individual's social capital, the social networks individuals belong to and the amount of trust within those networks²⁹. Social capital refers to "the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of [...] relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" To function, social capital requires a social structure, such as the innovation ecosystem. Social capital facilitates cooperation, and it becomes productive through interaction, "a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed." Reputation and trust, the key elements of social capital, have throughout history developed through business networks³⁰. We believe this to be ever more important in the innovation ecosystem. What's more, we believe that only social capital can help bridge the pitfalls apparent in attention work today.

²⁸ Hunt, T. (2009). *The Whuffie Factor. Using the Power of Social Networks to Build Your Business*, Crown Business: New York, NY.

²⁹ Luoma-aho, Vilma. *Faith-holders as Social Capital of Finnish Public Organisations*. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 42, 2005. Available online: <http://dissertations.jyu.fi/studhum/9513922626.pdf>

³⁰ Stobart, Jon. "Information, trust and reputation. Shaping a merchant elite in early 18th-century England." *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30, no. 3/4 (2005): 298-307.

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