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Innovation Journalism as Futures Journalism

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Innovation Journalism as Futures Journalism

It has been argued that futures orientation is one of the central aspects of innovation journalism. Reporting on technological innovation is especially seen to benefit from the scenario approach. This is to avoid an inherent sense of determinism present in much of the technology journalism. Moreover, the demand for horizontal, multidisciplinary analysis and the adoption of the systemic approach connect innovation journalism with the field of futures studies. The study at hand analyses the interconnections between innovation journalism and futures studies as regards values, goals, and applicability of methods. Along with theoretical considerations, a two-round Delphi is used to gather Finnish media experts' notions of futures orientation in media. Emphasis is placed on analysing how journalists see writing about futures topics as well as on possible drivers and obstacles that either promote or restrain journalists' adoption of a stronger futures approach into their work. The study combines theoretical arguments with the realities of the newsroom in trying to draw insights from futures studies to develop innovation journalism more into the direction of "futures journalism".

Keywords: innovation journalism, futures studies, Delphi method, narratives of innovation, newsroom perspective

1 Introduction

In the expanding media environment of recent years, journalism has been forced to find measures to survive in a hardened competition. It has been increasingly challenged by amateur journalists, social media applications and other non-traditional sources of information. Exceedingly high expectations of providing a more holistic, pluralistic and ethically sound coverage of the world events are placed on journalism. At the same time, prophesizing the end of professional journalism has been a favorite topic within the scholarly journalism literature¹. Complex ecological, economic and demographic issues and threats, such as the climate change, national competitiveness and, in many of the developed countries, the aging population, have once more brought to the fore discussions on the role of the media in solving societal problems, often focusing on their inefficiency in doing so. While acknowledging that high quality information is one of the key factors in the globalized world, many have drawn attention to what they see as the various shortcomings of the institutionalized media. One theme in the current

¹ See e.g. Deuze, M. (2007). Convergence culture in the creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. DOI: 10.1177/1367877907076793

debate on media is the doubt that the early modern ideals of journalism – most notably objectivity, expertise and realism – might no longer be sufficient guidelines for fulfilling the tasks serious journalism is expected to perform.

In an attempt to clarify the ongoing discussion on the direction journalism should pursue in order to retain its relevance, Kunelius² examined different notions of good journalism that can be found among interested and experienced non-journalistic actors. Nine complementary / challenging criteria for good journalism around the core definition of classic good journalism³ were found. These new dimensions can be condensed into the following list:

- plurality of perspectives
- particular user value
- prediction
- investigation, being critical
- initiating public debate: supporting the underdog
- ethical reflection
- optimism
- consequences
- new perspectives

From this list, one can see how new journalistic projects such as innovation journalism can be perceived as ways to respond to the pressures coming from the society. Journalists easily interpret these shifts from the traditional journalistic ideology as attempts to weaken journalistic autonomy, and thus welcome them less enthusiastically. Often the initiatives that can be interpreted to originate directly from some political agenda are considered especially suspicious as they can be seen as conflicting with some of the other roles that have been perceived as central to the journalistic mission, such as journalism as the “watchdog” of power.

In finding a delicate balance between preserving its professional integrity while at the same time seeking to promote issues that have been deemed worthy of special attention, innovation journalism draws a ready analogy to another field that has had to develop certain sensitivity towards these difficult issues. Futures studies has had to fence off accusations of mixing science with politics throughout its history.

² Kunelius, R. (2006). Good Journalism. On the evaluation criteria of some interested and experienced actors. *Journalism Studies* Vol. 7, No 5, 2006

³ The core definition of classic good journalism “emphasizes realistic (both in terms of epistemology and attitude), independent, neutral and generally representative journalism (...) presenting generally important objective facts as realistically as possible and remaining open for subsequent debate.” (Kunelius 2006)

Futures studies is not in itself committed to any specific ideology⁴ (even if many futurists are personally committed to such general goals as the betterment of humanity, peace, protection of the environment etc.). However, some of its central elements, such as seeing the future as open and undetermined, combined with an ethos of individuals shaping the future with the decisions and actions they make in the present, and most importantly, the task for futurists to forward those desirable futures that are produced as results of research processes, bring it to the slippery interface with the political sphere and raise questions about the legitimacy of futures research as a scientific enterprise. This dilemma of values and the role of interpretation (although present in varying degrees in all research as well as in “classic good journalism” dealing with complex issues involving several human actors with differing agendas), has in fact led futures studies to divide into two camps around the issue: Proactive or normative futures research on one hand and extrapolative forecasting on the other hand.

1.1 Proactive Futures Research vs. Foresight

To illustrate the process due to which futures studies has come to represent two different positions on objectivity and values, a brief history of futures studies is needed⁵. In its beginnings, futures studies (or “futurology” as was the preferred term in the early days) was certainly an ideologically motivated project: Ossip K. Flechtheim, who is most often credited as the founder of modern futures studies, proposed in the aftermath of WWI and inspired by Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, a science that would, instead of retrospective analysis, concentrate on evaluating the probability and reliability of different images of future states. He had high hopes for this new science he called Futurology, and e.g. named the following as the topics futures studies should cover:

*“the elimination of war and establishing sustaining peace; the abolishing of hunger, misery, repression and exploitation; democratization of society; ending exploitation of nature and its protection; and the creation of a new homo humanus”.*⁶

⁴ Here one must be reminded of the fact that futurists hardly share a common framework or ethos for their work. Any traits for futures research given here are necessarily only generalizations of a very heterogenic field.

⁵ Söderlun, S. & Kuusi, O. (2002). Tulevaisuudentutkimuksen historia, nykytila ja tulevaisuudet (The past, present and futures of futures studies). In: Kamppinen, Kuusi & Söderlund (Eds.)(2002). Tulevaisuudentutkimus – perusteet ja sovelluksia (Futures Studies - Foundations and Applications). SKS 896: Helsinki

⁶ Flechtheim, O. K. (1966). History and Futurology. Verlag Anton Hain: Meisenheim am Glan.

Although this early initiative for a new science of the future did not receive a significant amount of following, it nevertheless inspired many of Flechtheim's contemporaries in social sciences in examining the future of their own field.

Despite these idealistic beginnings, the main development of the field and its methodology was actually done under the aegis of US military operations research. After the Second World War, in which future oriented operations research had proven its usefulness, the research was continued in a newly founded RAND corporation. Several pioneering futurists, such as Olaf Helmer, Herman Kahn and Nicholas Rescher worked and developed methods for futures research, most notably the Delphi technique that still is one of the most used futures methods. Herman Kahn continued from RAND to found the Hudson institute that expanded the area of research from military strategy to the future of entire continents, especially the western hemisphere.

In the 1960s, two schools of futures studies were already visible. Futures research in the US concentrated on technology foresight and economic growth factors. To counterbalance this, from the beginning of 1950s in Europe, Robert Jungk's technology critical stance on the future and participatory futures workshops had started the normative, emancipatory wing of futures studies that resonated with Flechtheim's initial ideas about the science for the future.

Where the normative side of futures studies takes values as a starting point underscoring the importance of shaping the future, foresight considers itself value free and objective. Foresight aims at bypassing the difficult questions of power and influence and at achieving a more unambiguous status among other social sciences. While the normative side can culminate towards near determinism if presented uniformly, the foresight approach risks neglecting the values present in the choice of the object of the study, defining variables etc.⁷ Both sides have to consider their possible role in the formation of the future, for instance by way of a phenomenon commonly referred to as self-fulfilling prophecies.

One can draw an analogy between these two ways futures studies has tried to solve its relationship to objectivity by comparing it to the matrix proposed by Ainamo & Ahteensuu for possible roles for innovation journalism.

⁷ Masini, E. (1993). *Why Futures Studies?* Grey Seal: London.

	Past	Future
Non-epistemic	IV Ideology and the “fourth estate” – communalism, ideology (nationalism, freedom of speech etc.)	III Proactive futures research – presenting possible futures, estimation of desirability. <i>Innovation journalism II</i>
Epistemic	I Communication of knowledge – description and reporting	II Forecasting – presenting possible futures, estimation of probability. <i>Innovation journalism I</i>

Figure 1. The matrix for possible roles for innovation journalism, adopted and modified from Ainamo & Ahteensuu⁸

The matrix brings together modes of classical journalism and the two variants of futures studies and compares them to possible roles for innovation journalism. While recommending the epistemic form of futures orientation (II) for innovation journalism, Ainamo & Ahteensuu in fact lean towards the foresight approach. They connect the dubious elements in (innovation) journalism to the non-epistemic elements, ideology and subjectivity. On one hand one might ask, both in futures studies and in journalism, whether or not it is preferable to openly write out one’s ideological interests as they are bound to have an effect in some form or the other on the outcome. These are issues heavily debated, not only in futures studies but also in journalism studies.

All futures research, be it normative or extrapolative, rests on a wide variety of methods. Methodology aims at ensuring a balanced representation of competing and co-existing views. This is ensured, especially in normative futures studies, by subjecting all views under commentary from all stakeholders. Any choices made between desirable and undesirable futures are always made by the participants. Futures research does not aim at accurate predictions, but at diversifying the discussion and opening up the bifurcation points where individual action can potentially make a difference.

1.2 Selected Futures Research Methods

This chapter briefly presents two basic methods of futures research that might be employed by innovation journalism: the scenario method and the Delphi technique. These are not the only ones with relevance to innovation journalism: see for

⁸ Ainamo, A. & Ahteensuu, M. (forthcoming). Journalismi osana kansallista innovaatiojärjestelmää (Journalism as a part of the national innovation system). Tiedepolitiikka, vol. 32, No. 2.

instance Uskali⁹ for a presentation of the concept of weak signals and their analysis in innovation journalism context.

One of the central methods in futures studies is the **scenario method**, where different, logically and psychologically plausible states of the future are imagined and possible, probable and desirable futures estimated by forming different scenarios of the future. In the method, researchers aim to take into account as many of the relevant factors involved as possible to consider possible future states and chains of events leading there. The concept of scenarios was coined by Herman Kahn, who described the original idea as follows:

*“Scenarios are hypothetical sequences of events constructed for the purpose of focusing attention on causal processes and decision points. They answer two kinds of questions: (1) Precisely how might some hypothetical situation come about, step by step? And (2) What alternatives exist, for each actor, at each step, for preventing, diverting, or facilitating the process?”*¹⁰

The scenario method requires, in addition to solid analysis of the factors driving the change, vivid writing and drama skills. The same skills are required from a good innovation journalist.

The **Delphi technique**¹¹ is a method for collecting experts’ tacit knowledge concerning the future. It rests on the assumption that *experts* of a certain field know more about the field’s future than laymen¹², and, when given a possibility to *anonymously* give their opinions and reflect them upon the views of other experts of the same field by *iterating the answers on several rounds*, the answers will give meaningful information about the directions of future developments of the given field. While traditionally aiming at finding consensus among the different experts, modern versions of the technique concentrate on the plurality of the opinions, and try to find interesting and different views among the answers. It is often emphasized that the most critical phase of the Delphi study is the selection of the panelists. Most futurists try to include in the panel a balanced representation of not only the public and private sector actors, academia and NGOs, but also aim at balanced distribution of both sexes and different age groups. Depending on the object of the study it may be more or less easy to find panelists that make up an optimal group. The results from a Delphi are often presented in the form of scenarios. In the part of a Delphi study presented in the following chapter, the Delphi technique is used as a method for collecting journalism experts’ tacit

⁹ Uskali, T. (2005). Paying Attention to Weak Signals. The Key Concept for Innovation Journalism. Innovation Journalism Vol 2. No. 11.

¹⁰ Wiener, A. & Kahn, H. (1967). The Year 2000. Macmillan, New York.

¹¹ For more on Delphi, cf. Linstone, H. A. & Turoff, M. (Eds) (1975). The Delphi Method: Techniques and Applications. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA

¹² This premiss has received repeated criticism especially when it comes to assessing the future of complex systems (see e.g. Tetlock, P. E. (2005): Expert Political Judgment. How Good Is It? How Can We Know?).

knowledge and understanding of issues concerning writing about the future. Thus in this part of the study the technique is not used for assessing the future. The other features of the Delphi technique are preserved.

2 Finnish Media Experts on the Future Orientation in Journalism

As a part of a larger two-round Delphi study on Finnish media experts' views on the future of journalism¹³, questions about futures orientation were presented to the panelists. Questions concerned the possibilities of journalism to cover some of the tasks of futures studies¹⁴, motivations and obstacles for performing these tasks, and the types of stories suitable for a futures perspective. The experts were selected to the study on the grounds of having insider knowledge of the media field and / or direct influence over the strategic decisions that affect the journalistic work settings. We received 16 answers from panelists representing media scholars and journalists (from papers, magazines, television as well as active bloggers).

The results on the part of the possibility of journalism to cover the tasks of futures studies were on the whole positive: on the average, of all the tasks, 19 % had viewed them as self-evidently the tasks of journalism, only 2 % saw no possibilities for journalism to cover these tasks. Answering in varying degrees of positivity (on a scale from 1 to 7, responses 5-7) were 74 % of all answers, and on the negative side (responses 1-3) 24 % of all the answers. On the specific tasks, the highest scores went to the task "Increasing democratic participation in imaging and designing the future". The respondents were most hesitant about the tasks that required taking sides on the issue. These were the tasks of "Communicating and advocating a particular image of the future" and the task of evaluating the probability of a given state of the future ("The study of probable futures").

On the motivations for covering these tasks, respondents offered different views: some emphasized the role of journalism in shaping the future, responding to the

¹³ See the results of this Delphi in more detail in Heinonen & Salonen (forthcoming): Professional Journalism in Transition: Probing Possible Futures of Prosumerism in Journalism

¹⁴ Bell, W. (2003). *Foundations of Futures Studies. Human Science for a New Era: History, Purposes, Knowledge*. Transaction Publishers, London. Bell's list of nine tasks for futures studies includes: 1) The study of possible futures, 2) The study of probable futures, 3) The study of images of the future, 4) The study of knowledge foundations of futures studies, 5) The study of ethical foundations of futures studies, 6) Interpreting the past and orientating the present, 7) Integrating knowledge and values for designing social action, 8) Increasing democratic participation in imaging and designing the future and 9) Communicating and advocating a particular image of the future. For the study, tasks 4 and 5 were omitted as they were estimated to be evidently tasks belonging to academic futures studies. The rest of the tasks were concretized using examples, e.g. 1) "The study of probable futures for example by way of presenting different scenarios of the future."

expectations of the readers, the need for holism in journalism and some pointed out the need for increasing discussion on the subject.

While some saw the current economic conjuncture and the toughening of media business as obstacles, others perceived the skills of the journalists and aversion to change as main obstacles.

A wide variety of suggestions was presented to the question “What kinds of topics would benefit from a futures perspective?” Science, technology, policy and business were the most often recurring items. In addition, food, hobbies, ecology and cities were also mentioned.

3 Discussion

The claim that classical journalism is under pressure to change is hardly debatable. What several studies, including the Delphi reported in this article suggest, however, is that the core values of traditional journalism still have currency, and are in fact often seen as a self-evident base for journalism upon which new things can be built. Innovation journalism as a new kind of journalism is bound to meet resistance from a field that sees its main task as independent, critical reporting on issues it selects using its internal criteria of relevancy. But it can also face similar criticism from its audience, if it cannot wholly legitimize its mission. This article has suggested some ways, drawn from the field of futures studies, that innovation journalism could employ, especially if it intends to move more towards catering to general audiences instead of professionals. As “futures journalism”, innovation journalism could see its role in opening up the complexity involved in the development of innovation, as well as concretizing the role of the reader in this process. Several methods, such as scenarios, could be of use in underscoring the open nature of the future when reporting on issues still in process. The holistic approach already present in innovation journalism could benefit from a wider representation of stakeholders, not limiting it only to business, technology and politics (this is so even if it must be admitted that already having these three present in a story is an ambitious goal in itself). For this purpose, methods such as Delphi could be helpful, although using such laborious methods may not be a feasible option for many newsrooms. A suggestion for further research would be how to employ futures research methods in everyday journalistic settings.

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