

Reporting on Innovation Processes: Emancipatory Opportunity for Journalists

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Reporting on innovation processes: An emancipator opportunity for journalists

The paper argues that rather than simply reporting what is “new”, journalists are expected to become setters of agendas in society and of how the future will unfold. Is this kind of reporting of “the possible” rather than that of “the new” a good or a bad thing? More generally, what is the relationship of public policy in terms of innovation and journalism? What ought it to be? The authors of the paper approach the morality and ethics of innovation journalism inspired by the philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright. They follow his example of blending the historical method and the Frankfurt School of critical theory. The authors’ emancipative conclusion is that innovation journalism would appear represent more opportunity for journalists and their project than suppression, marginalization or other kind of subordination. For example it seems that attempts to “subordinate” journalists to national technology policy do not in the end represent the kind of undemocratic top-down discourse.

1 New role of journalism

”Innovation journalism” is a concept originating from technology policy. Defined as “journalism that deals with innovations”¹, the concept has been introduced into the crossroads of research literatures on national systems of innovation and communication. More precisely, innovation journalism comprises of journalism that concentrates on reporting about innovations, innovation systems as well as on the related technical, economical, juridical and political issues².

Innovation journalism comprises a new “beat” or specialization within the journalistic field that concerns the innovative actions of companies and the

¹ Nordfors, D. (2004) The Concept of Innovation Journalism and a Programme for Developing It, *Innovation Journalism* 1 (1): 1-12. Uskali, T. (2005) Paying Attention to Weak Signals – The Key Concept for Innovation Journalism, *Innovation Journalism* 2 (4): 1-20. Alkio, J. (2006) How to Write about the Future, *Innovation Journalism* 3 (4): 1-17. Nordfors et al (2006). Hautamäki, A. (2006) Presentation at 3rd Innovation Journalism Conference, Stanford University, April. Kauhanen, E., Kaivo-ja, J. & Hautamäki, A. (forthcoming) *Innovaatiomedia: Journalismi tulevaisuuden tekijänä*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus. Kauhanen, E. & Nopponen, E. (2007) *Innovation, Journalism, and the Future*. Helsinki: Tekes.

² See e.g. Bangeman, E. (2006) How to Integrate Innovation Journalism into Traditional Journalism, *Innovation Journalism* 3 (4): 1-16.

technology policies of the state³. Sweden, Finland, the United States, Germany, Spain and Slovenia are countries in which new educational and research initiatives to prepare students and professionals for this beat have already appeared⁴. National policy makers and business executives expect the specialist-journalists in these countries to report on political and techno-economical intentions which relate to innovation processes and potential future outcomes of these processes⁵ even when no events on which to report upon have as actually happened⁶. National-policy makers and companies executives can thus be said to put journalists in the role of innovation propagandists, to report and to promote innovation even the events underlying the news are, at best, emergent in terms of their eventual realization, rather than realized. In other words, rather than simply reporting what is “new”, journalists are expected to become setters of agendas in society and of how the future will unfold⁷. Is this kind of reporting of “the possible” rather than that of “the new” a good or a bad thing? More generally, what is the relationship of public policy in terms of innovation and journalism? What ought it to be?

The pure Marxist or other negatively oriented critic of Western liberal capitalism would not hesitate to claim that innovation journalism is a form of “hegemony” that subordinates journalists to the dominant classes of society, putting the poor journalists in the service of the competitive advantage of the nation and her companies, rather than in the service of civil society⁸. Rather than jump at any such conclusion without hesitation, however, we provide in this paper innovation journalism the benefit of doubt and carry out in this paper a systematic and enlightened review. We approach the morality and ethics of innovation journalism

³ Nordfors, D. (2004). Uskali, T. (2005). Hautamäki, A. (2006). Ainamo, A. (2006) Innovation Journalism for Bridging the Gap Between Technology and Commercialization, *Innovation Journalism* 3 (4): 1-17.

⁴ Academic research programs and projects (e.g. Vinnova-program “Innovation Journalism”) and publication forums (e.g. *Innovation Journalism* journal) have already been established, and scientific courses, meetings and conferences have been held in order to further and spread the knowledge on innovation journalism. See www.innovationjournalism.org.

⁵ In critical view, “innovation” has to be distinguished from “invention” as the latter comprises the act of coming up with a new technological idea, while the former comprises of its introduction into the context of the marketplace or the organization (see e.g. Hölj, M. (2004) Components of Innovation Journalism, *Innovation Journalism* 1 (5): 1-14, esp. 4,6).

⁶ Alkio (2006). Nordfors, D., Ventresca, M., Hargadon, A., Uskali, T., Ainamo, A., Jönssön, S., Grodal, S., Weinstein, A., Kennedy, M., Svensson, P. & Reid, F. (2006) A New Theme for Scholarly Research: Innovation Journalism and the Role of Journalism in Innovation (Eco)Systems, *Innovation Journalism* 3 (2): 1-18.

⁷ Alkio (2006). See also: Guice, J. (1999) Designing the Future: The Culture of New Trends in Science and Technology. *Research Policy*, 28(1): 81-98. Fairhurst, G. Irhurst, G. T. & Sarr, R. (1996). *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper & Row. McCombs, M. & Shaw, D. (1972) The Agenda-setting Function of the Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 36: 176-187.

⁸ See Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers, New York.

inspired by the philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright.⁹ We follow his example of blending the historical method and the Frankfurt School of critical theory¹⁰. While critical theory provides us a framework by which to reflect on the relationship between the core political idea and its implementation, the historical method helps shed light on how various styles and genres of journalism throughout modern history have both shaped and have been shaped by public policy in various national contexts in the Western world.

The background of our blend of methods is that the first of the two authors has learned about journalistic practices in practice. He has carried out research on journalism on the basis of the historical method. The second author of this paper is a philosopher versed in the various schools of thought in philosophy. Our paper leverages these backgrounds to prepare a narrative according to the historical method. The narrative reveals connections that appear to have always existed between political aims rising from the outside of journalism and presumptions and trends rising from within journalism. The contribution the paper is enlightenment of the benefits of a proactive orientation in the case of journalistic work, without understating the challenges of such a stance.

2 Who is to gain, who to lose

The Frankfurt school of critical theory is shorthand for critical theory in sociology and philosophy of society. An intellectual and social network of scholars in the Frankfurt of 1920s included scholars such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin and Marcuse was oriented toward radical social change. These scholars saw their work to be distinct from "traditional theory" which they saw to be overly "positivistic", "scientific", and "observational". On one hand, this group of scholars were inspired by work on aesthetics and literature criticism, explicitly linking up with the *critical philosophy* of Immanuel Kant, who used the term *critique* to mean philosophical reflection on the limits of claims made for certain kinds of knowledge and a direct connection between such critique and the emphasis on moral autonomy. On the other hand, they had an interest in rehabilitating an orientation toward revolutionary agency, or at least its possibility, at a time when they saw such an orientation to be in decline.

In the method of von Wright, the aim of description and analysis is to enable "liberation" from the hegemony of the dominant politico-ideological discourse in

⁹ von Wright, G. H. (1987): *Tiede ja ihmisjärki: Suunnistusyritys*. Helsinki: Otava.

¹⁰ Researchers such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Benjamin at the Institute for Social Research of the University of Frankfurt labeled their research as "critical theory of society". They and their work have since become known as "the Frankfurt school of critical theory".

societal discourse, as well as to enable enlightened “orientation”¹¹ that takes into account also the kind of marginal discourse which is at the root of innovation and learning on the part of journalists or any other group of actors in society¹².

Their particular method was to take the ideology of a society (espoused ideas such as freedom of the individual) and comparing that ideology with what they perceived as reality (for example, subordination of the individual to the social inequality under capitalism). The tradition of the Frankfurt school lives on in most social critiques of the domination by a few of the many, on one hand, and as an interest in emancipating the latter group in their relations with the former group, on the other hand. The critiques and the emancipatory interest are taken not to be in conflict. Von Wright argues that the processes of critical analysis, emancipation and reorientative capacity are best carried out using the historical method. The historical method with a critical eye provides a base for emancipation. In other words, von Wright advises us to assess the present and future impacts on the journalistic project of the innovation agendas of corporate executives and policy makers by starting with a historical critique of the various roles that journalism had had through time and crystallize scenarios about future opportunities and threats, as well as possibilities for orienting toward or away from the realization of one or several of those scenarios.

3 Innovation journalism in historical perspective

The origin of modern journalism may be traced back to “travel letters” in the Age of Enlightenment. Such letters spread information in regard to events and statistics taking place around what was then Western Europe and having a potential impact on the life of cosmopolitan individuals and the social networks they formed¹³. With the rise in the value of information, Francis Bacon (1605) predicted that science would yet have a most significant role in modern society.¹⁴

¹¹ von Wright (1987). Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1979) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² Cf. Hedberg, B. (1981) *How Organizations Learn and Unlearn*. In William Starbuck & Paul Nyström (eds.) *Handbook of Organizations*, 1. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Briggs, A. & Burke, P. (2003) *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁴ Bacon, F. (1605) *The Advancement of Learning*. Renaissance editions. [<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/ren.htm>, accessed May 9, 2007 by first author]

Indeed, mechanics and Newtonian science soon coevolved rapidly to produce scale advantages in invention, design and innovation¹⁵. This resulted in a number of new and commercially competitive instruments, machines and logistical solutions. Science-based communication, an integration of alchemist experiments into parts of scientific research results, and the application of these research results into new technologies and market innovations explain the economic rise and wealth creation taking place in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries. Adam Smith directed attention to the role of logistical infrastructure and trade in the form such innovations as financing for new carriages and shiploads, intermediate warehousing, as well as shipbuilding. He also studied the role of politics in the economical system and drew conclusions on the kind of politics that would promote sustainable paths of wealth creation¹⁶. As a result of such processes of emergence and realized strategy, the complementarities in and across science, culture, technology, economics, politics and trade in Britain were superior to those of Italy, for example, a country that was yet to establish itself as a nation-state with policy-making capacity¹⁷.

In also other Western “national projects” than those of Britain, such as the Swedish project, trade policy formed both the circumstances and a natural role for the journalism to further that citizens form a united group who voluntarily and unselfishly served their particular project of modernization¹⁸.

In Germany, List, a political economist, studied how Germany, a nation-state in the late 19th century at the stage of unification, could catch up the industrial and economical advantage of England¹⁹. List assessed critically Smith’s ideas and oriented the focus of German discourse on manufacturing and innovation rather than the pure science and logistics of trade that characterized British discourse. List also drew conclusions with regard to what kind of policy would most foster the wealth of his nation²⁰. He argued that the projects of national identity and unity were inherently tied with the project of wealth creation. Possible futures were to be scanned and guesses made about the shapes of things to come. By hindsight, some

¹⁵ von Wright (1987).

¹⁶ Freeman, C. (1995) The 'National System of Innovation' in Historical Perspective, Cambridge Journal of Economics 19: 5-24.

¹⁷ Jacob, M. (1988) The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution. McGraw-Hill, New York.

¹⁸ Hayes, C. (1926) Essays on Nationalism. The Macmillan Company, New York. Anderson, B. (1983) Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Dacin, T. (1997) Isomorphism in Context: The Power and Prescription of Institutional Norms, Academy of Management Journal 1997 40: 46–81. See the review of relevant literature in: Ainamo, A., Tienari, J. & Vaara, E. (2006) Between West and East: A Social History of Business Journalism and Management in Cold War Finland, Human Relations 59: 611-636.

¹⁹ Freeman (2002).

²⁰ Freeman (2002). See also NEEDHAM, J. (1954) Science and Civilisation in China. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

of these guesses later became reality, while others never saw the light of day. In turn, the Germany system inspired other emerging nation-states, such as the Finnish one. Journalism dealt with events and issues that were sometimes uncertain, such as with the life cycle and health impacts of Edison's inventions almost without delay²¹. In other words, journalism dealt with ambiguous and uncertain issues already in the 19th century – not only recently. Weak signals, mega-trends, and wild cards were a part of journalistic practices even at that time²².

By the end of the 19th century, the United States and Germany already began to catch up with the economic advantage of Britain. In many instances, they developed know-how and competences superior to those in Britain²³. Schumpeter recognized that industrial business sector rather than the trade or the public sector was the “engine” of innovation processes in the economy and society²⁴. The power of the industrial sector grew to such an extent that in many cases the media became captive to the interests of industrial cartels and entertainment value rather than news value or values in line with the building of the nation-state.²⁵ National legislative, executive and judicial power converged in an unacceptable way with the agendas of trade and manufacturing industries robber barons that kept on making themselves ever more immensely rich due to rapid wealth creation and the uneven distribution of that wealth. A new role for journalism had to be forged as a counterforce. This emerged in the United States at the *fin de siècle* in the form of a new role of being the “fourth estate” – a “watchdog of democracy” – to ensure that unacceptable convergence would not happen.²⁶ This new role for journalism quickly traveled “back” to Britain, the origo of modern models of national wealth creation.²⁷

Come the 20th century and especially the 1940s, military-industrial complexes of industrialists and national policy makers across Western countries put

²¹ The authors are grateful to Professor Mika Pantzar for this example.

²² For literature on weak signals, mega-trends and wild cards, see: Uskali, T. (2005). Nordfors, D. et al. (2006). Ansoff, I. (1984) *Implanting Strategic Management*. Prentice-Hall. Naisbitt, J. (1982) *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming our Lives*. New York: Warner Books.

²³ Porter, M. (1990) *Competitive Advantage of Nations*. New York: The Free Press. Edqvist (1997).

²⁴ Miettinen, R. (2002) *The Rhetorics of National Innovation Systems*. Helsinki: Edita. Miettinen, R. (2007) *Kansallinen innovaatiojärjestelmä ja tiede- ja teknologiapolitiikan kieli, Teknologia ja valta – seminaari*, 8-9.2.2007.

²⁵ Fligstein, N. (1990) *Transformation of Management Control*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

²⁶ Starr, P. (2004) *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

²⁷ Hampden-Turner, C. & Fons Tromperaanrs (1993) *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism*. London: Piatkus.

unprecedented pressure on professionals such as those in science²⁸. Journalists in the 21st century are not the first professionals to have been subordinated in public policy. Scientists have been key participants in the creation of vocabulary and grammar for more than political discourse²⁹. There were national differences, of course. Choices were made in several countries with regard in terms of being an active or a passive a “learning system”³⁰. For example, in some countries, the politics of government took concrete actions in the form of direct interventions in market mechanisms. In other countries, there were at the most subtle intentions to affect institutionally to the rules of the game of the market system³¹. In either case, many citizens considered that journalism were strong when it furthered the ideals of the civic society and weak when it did not do that³².

From the 1960s on, the ever raising transnationalism of citizens and companies, hedonistic worldview, and fotojournalism splintered the universal Western epistemic ideal that one and only one enlightened model of how to carry news in the traditional role of “travel letters” could exist³³. The traditional non-epistemic roles of journalism as fostering the national agenda or the unity of a nation also started to decline. Also the role as a watchdog of democracy became less pronounced. Journalists began to inform about local technological developments, about internationalization of markets and companies, and about global stock market capitalism virtually in the same breath.

4 Innovation journalism in emancipator perspective

In a superficial, innovation journalism challenges the primary and traditional role of journalism to report events as “news” only when the events have actually taken place, and when the states or entities reported upon can be “objectively” shown to

²⁸ von Wright (1987); Hughes, J. *The Manhattan Project: Big Science and the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Columbia University Press. Djelic, M-L. (1998) *Exporting the American Model*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁹ Freeman, C. (2002) Continental, National and Sub-National Innovation systems: Complementarity and Economic Growth, *Research Policy* 31(2): 191-211. von Wright (1987).

³⁰ Viotti, E.B. (1997) *Passive and Active National Learning Systems*. PhD. Dissertation. New School for Social Research.

³¹ Lundvall, B-Å (1992, ed.) *National Systems of Innovation: Towards A Theory of Innovation and Interactive Learning*. London: Pinter Publishers.

³² Heikkilä, H. (2001) *Ohut ja vankka journalismi. Kansalaisuus suomalaisen uutisjournalismin käytännöissä 1990-luvulla*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

³³ See Hobsbawm, E. (1994) *Age of Extremes: The Brief 20th Century*. London.

have changed in relation to what was before.³⁴ Objectivity, here, is taken to mean that different journalists report the events similarly or at least in ways that complementary when they comply to the methods, principles and procedures of good journalism; that is, the professional codes of ethical journalistic conduct. Innovation journalism would also appear to challenge the discretion of journalists to make independent journalistic decisions.

However, whatever policy as a top-level action plan leaves discretion for deliberation and creative detail in terms of the implementation of the policy. The policy is an institutional design that can be used to justify more than one way of organization and work³⁵. The current initiatives for innovation journalism are by no means the first time when the ideal of objective reporting and communication has been challenged. From the 19th century onwards, journalism has had also other roles than the original one of carrying news, to support the national(ist) agendas³⁶, and to keep the interests of the political, corporate, scientific and so on elites from fully converging in “hegemony” which would deaden the critical voice of civic society³⁷ (Figure 1). All of these four roles remain valid.

In sum, it seems that attempts to “subordinate” journalists to national technology policy do not in the end represent the kind of undemocratic top-down discourse. “Innovation journalism” or cell IV in Figure 1 is a role different from that of “innovation system” (cell III) that Miettinen (2002) has indeed shown to have been a top-down discourse.³⁸ The four historically derived roles of journalism are quite loosely coupled. The more roles there are, the more choice a journalist will have with which to forge an identity. Opportunities to make a choice are not the property of those subordinated, marginalized, or suppressed. Thus, our emancipative conclusion is that innovation journalism would appear represent more opportunity for journalists and their project than suppression, marginalization or other kind of subordination.

³⁴ Objectivity refers to knowledge that is intersubjectively confirmable.

³⁵ Scarpf, F. W. (1997) *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research*. Boulder: Westview Press 1997

³⁶ Hayes (1926).

³⁷ Starr (2002). See Gramsci (1971).

³⁸ Miettinen (2002).

	Past and present	The future
Non-epistemic	II Carrier of ideology – civil society, the agenda of the nation-state, freedom of speech, etc.	III Innovation system– Influencing the unfolding of a particular scenario of the future into the present
Epistemic	I News carrier – Description and reporting	IV Innovation Journalism – Scanning signals of the future to create scenarios

Figure 1. The traditional roles of journalism in society and innovation journalism

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