

### **Covering Innovation in a Developing Society**

Modern economies, to state the obvious, are innovation-driven. Talk to anyone covering business and the economy in a developed country like the U.S., and you will hear about future innovations involving some area of high tech. Some will tell you the place to look for important innovations is the field of biotechnology; others will say IT continues to hold great potential for generating newer forms of economic activity; still others will point to robotics as a spawning ground for future innovations, offering the firm assurance that it will revolutionize the way people do things at work and at home. Some will remind you that products in the armaments industry tend to become obsolete relatively quickly, and hence, must rely on constant innovation. From the perspective of people living in advanced countries, innovation is all about technology. But scholars will tell you that the innovation story is about a mix of business, technology and politics all shaping each other.

### **Innovation has to come from ideas aimed at bringing social change**

A wider view of the issue, however, suggests that innovation in a developing-country context is to come mostly from ideas aimed at bringing about social change. There will be innovative uses of existing technology here and there; but in the short run, not much in the sphere of cutting-edge technology. The example of Bangladesh's Muhammad Yunus, who won international praise and last year's Noble Prize for his seminal work on micro credit, is illustrative of the value of innovative ideas for social change. He is now reportedly in the process of pursuing another Big New Idea named "social business enterprise" which, according to a recent edition of Fortune magazine, "he thinks can revolutionize a world still being transformed by his first big idea." This Big New Idea involves something as ordinary as a yogurt factory.

### **Doing innovation stories is different and demanding**

So what is distinctive about covering innovation in a developing country? At first, it looks like any other subject. After all, you are supposed to report facts, and facts are facts no matter what the story is and where it takes place. Yet, there is a difference. You might imagine that the difference has to do with the low tolerance that is generally associated with Third World governments, but you would be wrong. Innovation processes aimed at economic development and social progress does not try the tolerance of any government. If anything, governments want to be facilitative and take credit for whatever good comes out of a project.

Covering an innovation story can be more demanding in terms of the time and patience that it takes to report a story in a developing country. For instance, it is common practice in political reporting to include speculation whenever the opportunity presents itself. But good editors will not allow suppositions or guesswork in the coverage of an innovation story whether it is about a technology-based process or a business model such as Muhammad Yunus's micro credit project or yogurt factory. Reporters have to provide their readers with precise information, backed by facts and figures. Sometimes small analytical details may make all the difference to the success of a new business model, especially one that is based on an innovative idea. Like for instance, there is nothing so novel anymore about micro credit. A number of NGOs in various countries have been

extending small loans to poor people to assist them in attaining a measure of economic self-reliance. Yet the only big success story is that of the Grameen Bank for the role it played in helping to advance Muhammad Yunus's first big idea. Clearly, Grameen has been doing something in a way others have not. So you need to try and nail down all the elements that make such a project into a successful business innovation model.

### **Promotion of public good must be the guiding principle**

The key challenge for anyone covering a big new idea or an innovative use of existing technology is to see any such development for its worth at an early stage. For those doing innovation journalism, detecting 'weak signals' is not an easy task even when these emanate from tangible technological advancements or novelties. It is even harder to deal with innovations springing from ideas whose strength is not fully tested. If such a process is still at a development stage, it is even harder to report. Reporters covering it have to guard against being used as propagandists for ideas that may never fly. Yet, they must be able to draw public attention to Big Idea stories so that they may get support from other important players in the equation, such as government, investors or financial institutions, helping the Big Idea to flourish for the greater good of society. Promotion of public good must remain a guiding principle, which may not always be relevant in the case of high technology innovations since they are hardly ever motivated by a desire for social change.

### **Dealing with credibility issue**

This kind of story requires investigative reporting to establish whether or not the innovation in question will work; and in the likelihood of success, the characteristics, quality and extent of its benefits. Such determination is not easy in technological innovation projects, as I have learned to my utter frustration.

Even those working on innovation projects and interested in media attention are reluctant to reveal precise information. The reluctance may have to do with a fear of giving away clues to potential competitors regarding the nature and scope of progress being made, or a reluctance to raise the public's expectations. Still, your editor won't let you resort to 'interpretive writing,' rejecting it as speculation, which has no place in an innovation story unless it is the opinion of an expert. Even though the good old guidelines of reporting— who, what, when, where, why and how— apply to the writing of an innovation story, the reporter must look beyond those questions to establish the credibility, or lack thereof, of both an entrepreneur and an innovation.

### **Journalists must hold bad innovators to account**

As noted earlier, most of the innovation stories in developing societies--whether they involve a new idea of a new use for an existing technology--are intended to improve the life of the general public. But the innovation may also have unintended negative consequences. Compared to developed societies, which have regulatory bodies and consumer rights organizations to ensure quality control and safety standards things are quite lax in other parts of the world. Take, for example, an unsavory innovation in public transportation in Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city. While the city's population has

nearly tripled to 10 million over the last two decades due to a rapid rural-to-urban migration, while city services, including public transport, have lagged behind. One of the popular modes of transportation is an imported two-seat rickshaw. Somebody came up with an idea: why not simply put a motorcycle in front of a locally manufactured larger rickshaw that can seat up to six people. This innovation may have eased the transportation situation for some, but in terms of passenger safety, it has proved to be extremely hazardous. The six-seat rickshaws are frequently involved in accidents that reveal the innovation's severe engineering flaws. Yet, citizens continue to use six-seat rickshaws. Whether innovative or traditional, businesses in developing societies do not always take social responsibility very seriously. It falls upon journalists to hold businesses accountable for their acts of omission or commission, and also to inform their readers of the true worth of a New Big Idea that promises to bring positive social change.

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