

# Roles and Challenges of Journalists in Finland's Changing Innovation Environment

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# Roles and Challenges of Journalists in Finland's Changing Innovation Environment

This presentation discusses how political and journalistic innovation discourses interact, and how journalists see their roles in Finland's innovation environment. This document includes some preliminary findings of the project *Global Challenges of Innovation Journalism (2008-2010)*<sup>1</sup>. According to the previous study<sup>2</sup> (2005-2006), journalists considered themselves mainly as information mediators, and many journalists seemed to strive for certain objectivity in journalism. In this study, we want to define how the latest changes in political innovation discourse might have reflected on journalism. We look for signs of new conceptualization of innovation in journalism and its practices. We aim to perceive the roles of journalists and identify the new work-related challenges journalists may meet. The context of this study is the Finnish innovation environment, which has been undergoing some significant changes in the past ten years. The later phase of the project will also include international comparative analysis.

For this study, we interviewed seven innovation policy experts (group a) and twelve journalists in print media (both newspapers and magazines). The semi-structured interviews were conducted during winter 2008-2009. The experts were asked to describe the innovation system, its changes and challenges. They were also asked to ponder the role of media in interaction with other actors in the national innovation system. In the second phase, we had six forefront journalists (group b), who were interviewed about the role of journalism in innovation environment. The third group (group c) represented journalists who had written about innovation topics, in this case about climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> The project is aiming at e.g. studying the global practices of innovation journalism by analyzing their presence and role in services concerning climate change management, energy technology and aging of population in different countries. Research methodology comprises content analysis and focus group interviews. The project is coordinated by Journalism Research and Development Centre at Tampere University: <http://www.uta.fi/laitokset/tiedotus/jourutkimus/english.php>

<sup>2</sup> Kauhanen, Erkki & Noppari, Elina (2007) *Innovation, Journalism and Future*. Final report of the research project *Innovation Journalism in Finland*. Tekes. Technology review 200/2007

This empirical study indicates some broadening understanding of innovation concept among journalists. The journalists interviewed defined innovation as a new invention or service, or a new insight or way of thinking. They were also familiar with the terms social and public innovations. However, they considered these intangible innovations difficult to identify and write about. The new terms were partly seen as fussing and labelling old things.

The experts interviewed considered media as very significant players in innovation environment - even more than journalists themselves, but they considered media coverage on innovation issues insufficient. Most journalists considered their role as adding on understanding of their audience. They aspired to simplify abstract themes to concrete cases. They described Finnish journalism as relatively uncritical, and they would like to see media taking more active roles. However, this would require more professional expertise and possibilities to deepen their understanding about innovation issues. This was not seen likely to happen within diminishing resources in newsrooms.

The political innovation discourse was not well-known to most journalists, and they did not see political discourse reflecting on journalism. However, the new challenges in the innovation environment, such as globalisation, sustainable development and aging of the population<sup>3</sup>, were notified as important issues in reporting. We could deliberate if journalism has a moral obligation to bring these themes to public agenda. The strategic goals in innovation politics, such as user orientation or global networking, were considered important but not much applied to journalistic practices.

The study indicates that there are expectations related to online networks, user generated contents and bottom-up innovation. Media could play some part in contributing platforms for these activities, but the concrete models are quite yet to become. The Internet connotes both threats and possibilities. When news is read more and more online, the print paper should find its role in commenting, telling backgrounds and contexts of the stories. According to our study, this kind of analysing approach is rare and longed-for.

Key words: innovation journalism, innovation environment, Finland

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<sup>3</sup> These are mentioned in national innovation strategy: Proposal for Finland's National Innovation Strategy 2008: <http://www.innovaatiostrategia.fi/en/>

# 1 Political innovation discourse

The proposal<sup>4</sup> for Finland's new national innovation strategy was submitted to the Ministry of Employment and Economy in June 2008. The document stated that Finland had succeeded well in international comparisons of education, research and technology, but rapidly intensifying competition in global innovation environment is challenging Finland's competitive advantages. Innovation concept has expanded and diversified considerably in the past few years, and Finland should be able to strengthen and diversify its innovation activities. The proposal names four main drivers of change: globalisation, sustainable development, new technologies and aging of the population.

For this study, we interviewed seven innovation policy experts to discuss Finland's innovation environment, and its strengths and weaknesses. One of the experts was a high-powered member of the innovation strategy steering group; one was in a leading position in Finnish Innovation Fund; three had positions in different research organizations, one was a member of Parliament and its Committee for the Future, and one represented Finnish Association for Digital Rights.

The Finnish innovation system was mostly seen as effective and productive, but no more very competitive internationally. The system is too monolithic, led top-down and not willing to renew itself. The policymakers involved in innovation discourse remain too long in their positions, and broader social networks are needed. The innovation policy has been technology-led, and quite many extensive technology programs have been funded. Today, the drivers of innovation policy are seen to originate from demand, no more from supply. According to our expert interviews, this is also seen as a new challenge for innovation policy. Innovations can not be developed top-down, but the system should support the innovation activities bottom-up.

*“The innovation system is too fragmental, complex and segmented to different organizations. This is why we should join these puzzles together to create more effective system.”*(An interviewee/group a) Instead of the system, many experts prefer developing the innovation environments and local innovation centres. The national system can serve as a structural enablement, but the innovation activities require interaction in local and global networks.

The experts saw media as adding on the understanding about the complexities of the innovation system and its functions. Media should increase public awareness about the possibilities of new innovations and reduce the prejudices which may prevent people from mobilizing them. *“Media should interpret the innovation environment. Media gives it a face, a voice and a name. We can construct the innovation world through media.”*(An interviewee/group a) Media can also create

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<sup>4</sup> Finland's National Innovation Strategy 2008. The proposal was prepared by the Innovation Department of the Ministry and a steering group chaired by Esko Aho, president of the Finnish Innovation Fund.

positive circles for innovations by bringing them up to public forums (e.g. make them attractive to investors).

Media was described as having remarkable influence on innovation processes. However, media coverage of innovations was seen inadequate, not very competent, uncritical and depthless. It appears that media repeats the same collectively shared interpretation with no critical deliberation. *“Finland’s consensual innovation policy would need critical voices of journalists to promote discourse about policy issues”* (An interviewee/group a). The experts would like to see more specialized and diversified views, higher professionalism and deeper subtext for the stories. Innovations should also be tracked and reported more internationally.

## 2 Journalistic discourse

The political innovation discourse did not seem to inspire the journalists interviewed for the study. They preferred writing good journalism to innovation journalism. Most of them consciously avoid using the term “innovation” in their stories. Especially the journalists working for daily newspapers try to concretize complicated issues for their audience. Writing about the political systems is considered *“torturing the readers”* (An interviewee/group b). Instead, they look for stories, which have meaning for people’s everyday life. This can denote writing about new ideas or concepts, which ease people’s lives, e.g. bring new businesses or more jobs to the area.

According to our interviews, the innovation “system” is difficult to approach. The political discourse is too abstract, and the experts seem to discuss among their own circles. The innovation policy lacks “innovations” to produce more comprehensive information. One of the interviewed suggested policy makers to employ spokesmen to popularise innovation field. The broader concept of innovation, including social and public innovations, was familiar to the journalists but difficult to identify. *“The social innovations have always been there, like skiing holidays<sup>5</sup>, but they have not been called such”* (An interviewee/group b). Most of the journalists found the concept of social innovation too blurry to use in their work.

Though journalists are not willing to use the policy terms in their stories, they consider it important to write about innovations in their broader sense. It seems that the drivers of change mentioned in innovation strategy, such as sustainable development or aging of population, are not only journalists’ interest to write about, but also issues from which to look for solutions. Journalists may feel morally obligated to bring certain themes to public agenda. According to our interviews, journalists do not want to campaign for anything, but even so they often aspire to promote for “good” like democratic or ecological values. All economic journalists mentioned trying to bring up positive economy news during the slump. *“The economy news is now ninety percent negative. The statements of the firms are all going down, and we have to report them. However we have an obligation to*

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<sup>5</sup> Holidays in winter, when schools are closed.

*bring up also positive stories, which need to be searched for with tweezers.* “(An interviewee/group b) User orientation<sup>6</sup>, which is one of the strategic choices in innovation strategy and also mentioned in our expert interviews, was not seen reflecting in journalistic practices. The role of audience was seen as conventional customers and recipients, not as active participants in innovation environment. Journalists make some effort to bring up the entrepreneurial views and e.g. stories about innovative people applying patents for their ideas. However, people are not actively involved in creating these stories. This kind of citizen journalism was seen happening elsewhere, e.g. in social media networks. There is emerging interaction between journalists and audience in weblogs, but it stands for mainly feedback for the stories. Media was seen as a possible platform for grassroots’ innovation activities but there were no models for such, except online queries and carbon footprint tests. However, the journalists mentioned civic organizations having increasing public attention.

Journalistic roles in innovation environment were mostly seen as reporting and describing new things. However this was not considered sufficient and the journalists interviewed looked for more critical, questioning and competent journalism. The journalists criticized media for being uncritical, toothless and often depthless. This is due to tight scheduling in editorial offices and tendency for short and quick reporting. The journalists interviewed would like to see journalists taking more active roles in innovation environment. Media should bring important issues to the agenda, scan different options and add to understanding of new things. Media should recognize weak signals, but it should not hype new things. Being critical should not be an end in itself. It demands enough understanding of the issue. *“Journalists should analyse different aspects and build syntheses. It is better to stay quite neutral in reporting; the columns are a forum for personal opinions.”* (An interviewee/group b) Most interviewed would like to see journalists in some kind of watchdog roles: e.g. examine the background information of their stories and critically observe the use of public funds. Although the journalists considered media’s role essential in the innovation environment, they could not see individual journalists having much influence. Media’s role is powerful, but media field very fragmented.

### 3 Changes in journalist’s profession

The globalized and networked society offers both new possibilities and new requirements for journalistic work. The information sources are more diverse, and journalists utilise internet as all the others. Internet has become a forum for quick news, and many newspapers have renewed their strategies towards more analysing and compiling information. On the other hand, online news has also affected the forms of news on paper making them shorter and easily looked over. This is why many readers go online to find more profound information.

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<sup>6</sup> Innovation Strategy suggests four basic choices: 1) innovation activity in a world without borders, 2) demand and user orientation, 3) innovative individuals and communities, and 4) systemic approach (Finland’s National Innovation Strategy 2008).

The journalists could not mention any specific changes in journalistic practices caused by the changes in innovation policy discourse. However, there are some new challenges, which came up in many discussions. One is related to information sources. Since innovation issues are often obscure and abstract, journalists can be easily lead by their information sources. Many PR fact sheets are published as such. The journalists are aware of that and emphasize the importance of cross-checking their information. The social networks of different experts and acquaintances are highly valued in ensuring questionable claims. If this expert ring is too narrow, the same dominating experts may come up in public at every turn.

Since journalists may write about anything beyond their own expertise, the work requires endless studying. Some of the journalists would bring more hard sciences to journalistic education, whereas some of them would not require journalists having to specialize. *“Journalists don’t have to know about innovations more than any other subjects. In the end, this world is a simple place when you look at it from the right angle. Journalists should consider who to meet. It can be wise just to widen one’s lunch ring - - “(An interviewee/group b).*

Almost all of the journalists interviewed mentioned being extra cautious of media hype. It is important not to behave like sheep going all to one direction. One interviewed told preferring going upstream when a hype curve seems to grow. *“After the hype phase comes a hangover phase. And this is when something really interesting may pop up. Biodiesel is one of the issues now in hype curve and has great expectation. Then e.g. distance work is in hangover phase, quite forgotten in media, but may have some new potential.” (An interviewee/group c)*

Some of the journalists mentioned the need for investigative journalism. Media should call things into question more and study the motives behind the decisions. Media should give some background perspective, and also aim to foresee new things or ideas, which might turn into innovations. It would be important for media also to foresee times of crisis, so that people would be better prepared to handle new situations and discuss them in early stages. *“There might be a worldwide crisis all of a sudden, which requires quick decisions. - - And there is no time for democratic discussions any more.” (An interviewee/group c)*

## 4 Innovations and journalistic practices

The specialized journalists have better chances to produce in-depth and analysing journalism, since they don’t have the daily news desk pressures. Economic and political journalists may also use terms like innovation or innovation politics in their stories, while most journalists try to avoid them.

The third group of journalists interviewed represented journalists who had written about innovations and especially stories connected to climate change. Most of them were specialized in economics or science. The science journalists seemed to be most worried about the fragmented information production and the inadequate checking of the facts. Popularizing news should not mean ignoring the facts.

Environmental themes and climate change have been growing issues in public for some time. For the journalists interviewed, the climate change is now obvious and doesn't require more argumentation. This is why they feel having new obligation to tell about alternative solutions to fight off it. The climate change issues should also be part of political and economical stories, not only included in environmental stories. *"It is not good to categorize some issues only as environmental journalism. These climate issues should be also part of economical news – which tells now only about recession. However the climate themes may appear even in women's magazines, which may have even more influence - -".* (An interviewee/group c)

Many of the stories about climate change, or environmental issues, originate from some kind of anger or wonderment of the journalists: e.g. why the alternative energy sources are not properly considered, or why one solution is so much hyped? The interviewees referred to the interests of industry dominating public discussions and hidden agendas behind many decisions. People are given an impression about the state of things (e.g. the needs for nuclear power), but the real motives may be quite different. *"The story began from the foolishness that 70-75% of our pellet production is exported; even it is a renewable natural resource, which we would badly need ourselves. At the same time there were discussions about the EU's aims towards renewable energy, which was considered impossible to achieve. I wondered why pellet was utilized so much better in Sweden than in Finland - -".* (An interviewee/group c) The journalist explored internet for more information and found pellet association, pellet producers and customers using pellet for heating their houses.

Another interviewee felt anger about the claim that alternative energy sources could not be a substitute for nuclear power plant. The story got started at a scientific conference, after listening to a presentation covering wind energy technology. One of the interviewees aimed to offer tools for measuring environmental impacts by launching the term coal footprint to general use. The story had an everyman's/woman's perspective to climate change, trying to calculate how much an individual's choices effect the environment. The story included an online coal footprint test, which became very popular. *"We also had a Baltic Sea test, but this was much more popular. The footprint test was simple, related to everyday life and it could be done quickly."* (An interviewee/group c)

The work processes concerning innovation issues or climate change are not considered different from any other issues. When writing stories, journalists tend not to consider innovation journalism, only good or bad journalism. Writing about innovations requires studying new and often abstract things, and trying to demystify them to the audience. Most of the journalists interviewed had academic degree in the field (e.g. political science or social sciences), which was not connected to the issues they write about. However this was usually not considered as a problem because the subjects of the stories vary all the time. The journalists seemed to choose the subjects according to their personal interests more than their educational knowledge.

Various sources of information can be easily found online, but the journalists valued most the ones highly esteemed and already well-known. Specialized

international magazines, science institutions, conferences and public institutions were mentioned as typical sources of information. Some institutions were seen more active in their PR-communication than the others. Some of the journalists could see the activating role of civic organizations in public discussions. The environmental organizations were also mentioned as reliable sources of information.

There are no specific formats for stories about innovation issues. Graphics and other visual elements are often used to clarify complexities or to explain something that doesn't exist yet. A good story should include some interesting details, centrepiece and inventive representation. The formats utilized from the future studies such as future scenarios or panel work were familiar to the journalists and used in a few cases. However, they were not much favoured mainly because they are too laborious. They also need too much space in the paper when the trend is more towards short and compact stories. *"Now the typical story includes four or five short stories which are linked with graphical elements. They are short informative bits, which each may tell a lot. There was also a nice story in Wired, which was structured only by different sizes of numbers in different positions - -"* (An interviewee/group c). When the online and offline news compete for attention, the headlines and visual representation should be attractive.

The journalists admitted that follow-up of the issues like innovation processes is weak. Media focus on sudden and dramatic events rather than long processes. This was considered as a bothersome situation. International follow-up was also considered inadequate. The journalists emphasized the importance of international contacts and networking, and they personally make effort to see the global context in innovation activities. The innovations abroad are not enough observed in Finnish media.

## 5 Conclusions

This study indicates that journalists are aware of the wider concept of innovation including e.g. social and public innovations<sup>7</sup>. They are also quite familiar with the actors forming the national innovation system and their roles in it. However, the innovation (society) policy<sup>8</sup> was not so well known and only three out of ten journalists had been following the innovation policy discussion. The political innovation discourse does not raise passion among journalists. All but one of the journalists tries to avoid the term innovation in their stories.

This leads us to ask: is there any value using the innovation discourse in a journalistic text? Kauhanen's answer is yes. He claims that the innovation discourse has a relevant background theory attached, which can develop the

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<sup>7</sup> This seems to be different compared to the previous study in 2007 (Kauhanen & Noppari 2007, 65)

<sup>8</sup> Kauhanen suggest the term innovation society policy for the wider discussion that binds innovation policy discussion to wider social and cultural concerns (Kauhanen & Noppari 2007, 24).

innovation discussion<sup>9</sup>. Thus if media could demystify this discourse, it might open access for more people to join the discussions, which is now restricted to the political and expertise elites. The journalists should acquaint themselves with the political discourse to be able to interpret or analyse it to their audience. On the other hand, the politicians and experts have also responsibilities in decoding the policy discourse.

Although the political and journalistic discourses seem to bypass without much interaction, many of the challenges and drivers of innovation policy have reflected on journalism. The economic slump, environmental issues, globalization and aging of population are clearly issues of concern also in journalistic discourse. Journalists are also not satisfied with mediating the information only but rather take more solution centred approach.

The aims of the policy to support bottom-up innovations and more demand driven development have similarities with the raising interests of media to cooperate with their audience. The interests are alike but not many ideas have realized. All the journalists referred to social media and journalistic weblogs; but the roles of people are mainly represented as customers and not active participants, except some individuals who invent and patent themselves. Media could also have a role in providing a platform for bottom-up innovation activities, even though the journalists could not take the idea further. There seems to be call for new innovations for bottom-up innovation.

The political and journalistic innovation discourses both include different so-called *framing*. Frames exist at all levels of a conceptual and interpretative structure, and they are binding but still negotiable<sup>10</sup>. The same frame can appear inside different discourses, and there may be different frames inside one discourse<sup>11</sup>. The journalists build frames (e.g. concerning climate change), which is seen in media outcomes, and audiences use media's frame setting to build their own frames (making sense of things). This again influences attitudes and behaviour, and is reflected also on decision making. *Agenda setting* theory describes the same kind of media influence. When media choose issues to be published, they also influence the public agenda and the policy agenda. This was mentioned as remarkable both in discussions with experts and journalists. However, the framing, that is how media present new things, was more emphasized by the expert group. The journalists felt that they have influence when all the media advocate something, but not so much as individuals working on their own.

This study indicates that both innovation policy experts and journalists see media in a responsible role in innovation environment. There are some differences in aspects and nuances, but the views are not as different as one might expect.

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<sup>9</sup> Kauhanen, Erkki & Noppari, Elina (2007) Innovation, Journalism and Future. Final report of the research project Innovation Journalism in Finland. Tekes. Technology review 200/2007, 28-32

<sup>10</sup> Kauhanen, Erkki & Noppari, Elina (2007) Innovation, Journalism and Future.

<sup>11</sup> Wiio, Juhani (2006) Media uudistuvassa yhteiskunnassa. Median muuttuvat pelisäännöt. Sitran raportteja 65.

Although the journalists are principally against advocating anything in their profession, they stand for environmental issues and show concern about the economic recession. And they also try to contribute to these issues. Thus there seems to be both aspects of libertarian and *social responsibility* inside journalistic discourse.<sup>12</sup> The journalists consider themselves free to inform and criticize, but also see some social responsibilities in their roles. *Interpretive* journalism seems to go beyond objectivity. Objectivity is important when it denotes providing facts, but journalism is not just that. Innovations and serious issues require more interpretive and in-depth analysis. Many of the journalists interviewed considered acting also as watchdogs on authorities and decision making processes.

So how does the interpretive journalism cope with global and rapidly changing environment? Not so well according to our interviewees. It seems obvious that journalists need more expertise to be able to follow and analyse new things. However, journalists rarely have chance to specialize; on the contrary, the profession has become overextended. And media contents are more and more judged by their market value, not quality attributes. This is why many readers go online to search more in-depth and interpretive stories from diverse news sources.

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<sup>12</sup> Ward, Stephen J.A. (2009) History of Journalism Ethics:  
[http://www.journalismethics.ca/research\\_ethics/history.htm](http://www.journalismethics.ca/research_ethics/history.htm)