

## NB. Work in Progress

# **How journalists report on innovation: 'Models' of innovation among working UK journalists**

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## **How journalists report on innovation: ‘Models’ of innovation among working UK journalists**

### *Abstract*

Journalists cover innovations frequently, but academic research is only beginning to explore issues at the interface of journalism and innovation – i.e. how do current conventions in the practice of journalism shape the coverage of innovation, what features of innovation make it difficult to report on, and how these issues influence each other (Ventresca, Nordfors et al., 2006). This research reports on variations in how practicing journalists, editors, and innovation bloggers (henceforth all referred to as “journalists”), conceptualize ‘innovation’. We explore the contents of these cognitive frames of ‘innovation’ through a semi-structured interview protocol, with questions on what journalists think innovation is, how do they cover innovation, what are the challenges in covering innovation and how is innovation coverage different from coverage of science or business stories. We report data from interviews with practicing journalists, editors, and innovation bloggers that explore their working conceptions of ‘innovation’ through data garnered from interview, observational, and elicitation strategies. We also draw from content coding of a sample of archival articles about innovation. We suggest future directions for comparative studies between different types of practicing journalists.

## **1 Introduction**

### *Theory motivation and research questions*

We suggest that conceptions of ‘innovation’ are to some degree occupational and cultural artifacts. Such constellations of beliefs and assumptions may have impact on the approach, content, and the tone of the coverage of innovations. We develop a research strategy built around identifying ‘models’ of innovation among professional journalists as cognitive frames. We are interested in the conceptions of the essence and nature of innovation that these journalists hold as well as how they cover innovation in practice. Our working hypotheses are three: that there are a few identifiable cognitive ‘models’ of innovation, that these models vary between occupational groups because of different locations in the system of media professions, and that innovations are covered in a specific manner,

unique from other topics, as a result of the distributed features of innovation processes.

## 2 Research questions

- *Research question 1: What are features of the cognitive models of innovation in use by journalists?* With our interview protocol we seek to identify the frames, i.e., the mental models, with which journalists approach reporting on innovation. Cognitive frames and mental models affect the interpretations professionals and other occupational groups make about their focus of attention, both what they do or do not notice and how they organize that information. (Bechky 2003; Medin 1989; Medin et al 2006; Porac et al., 2002; Rindova et al., 2004). On the one hand the mental models of innovation can vary along the lines of whether innovations are considered events/outcomes or processes (Schumpeterian model) and the criterion of novelty (invention vs. brokering/recombination model). On the other hand the models may incorporate an individualistic perspective of a heroic innovator or organisation (Rindova et al. 2006), or a perspective of innovations arising from a community of contributors (Sawhney and Lee, 2005). We expect to find out that journalists take mostly a perspective of innovations being completely new things which replace old things, along the lines of Schumpeterian thinking. On the other hand we expect the journalists to be alert to the various potential social and political impacts of innovations, by which they can be interpreted as placing innovations into a societal context.
- *Research question 2: What sources of variation in the cognitive models of innovation held in practice among journalists?* We work from the assumption that these models are artifacts of culture and occupation. We draw from Abbott (1988) on the system of the professions and the notion of 'jurisdiction' to evaluate the sources of differences between journalists located in different places in the occupational space.
- *Research question 3: What lessons from this inquiry in cognitive frames of 'innovation' for debates pro and con about a dedicated Innovation Journalism beat?* Based on the above findings as well as further questions on the need for a dedicated beat and dedicated staff we attempt to trace the existence of a practice that is different from

related, e.g. business journalism and science journalism, practices. We ask to compare innovation coverage to the coverage of other related areas to examine different practices. Also, we combine the data from these questions with content analysis of archival data to investigate variance in coverage style. We expect to find specific styles for innovation coverage, mainly as a result of the interdisciplinary character of innovations that are different from other related topics.

## **2.1 Research methods and strategy**

### *Research strategy, methods and data*

We develop a research strategy built around identifying ‘models’ of innovation among professional journalists. We design the research to maximize variation across occupational communities, including working journalists, editors, and innovation ‘bloggers’. We identify and code these frames, i.e., mental models, prototypes of ‘innovation,’ assumptions and semantic networks using standard content and frame analysis tools (Creed et al 2002). In addition we are interested in how journalists describe the challenges of covering innovation, and what good coverage is in relation to innovations. Furthermore we investigate whether working journalists think there is a need for a dedicated journalism specialty, or ‘beat,’ specifically for innovation, with training and practices developed for its purposes.

The sample includes 10 working journalists, 5 editors, and 5 innovation bloggers.

The data collection is based on interviews with journalists from various media organizations. We use a standard interview protocol. The interviews ask about four aspects of innovation journalism: 1) How to cover innovation? 2) What comprises innovation? 3) What makes innovation difficult to cover? 4) What are the characteristics of a ‘good’ article on innovation? The sampling strategy includes some media organizations that direct their news delivery to large, general audiences, and some media organizations that direct their news to specialised, niche audiences. We include in the sample both print and online news media. Our effort here is to capture a wider set of issues and dimensions variation, rather than testing existing arguments. Hence, the sampling strategy is an effort to maximize variation observed. Because we will use interview methods, we will be able to record this variety. In addition, we recover some archival data on published innovation stories and content code these for additional data to triangulate with the interview data.

### 3 Findings / Discussion

Our analysis identified six frames that shape ‘innovation’. The first four are not different from the usual journalistic demands for a story, while the last two are more innovation specific features.

1. Filtering and constructing innovation from pieces of information: Most journalists in the study think that they need to make decisions of what is important and what is not, that they need package the information in new ways and make things relevant for the audience.
2. Accessibility to readers: Journalists of the study are particularly concerned with how the stories on innovations are written or presented otherwise. There is an emphasis in their thinking of making these often complicated stories understandable for people and they need to be able to connect with their particular audience.
3. Usefulness of the innovation: One of the key criteria of an innovation for these journalists is that innovation needs to or tends to have an impact on market, it has relevance for people, it improves performance or efficiencies of businesses or it might even have a game-changing impact.
4. Innovation needs to be surprising or unusual to the audience: Another criterion of an innovation is that it is surprising to the reader.
5. Hard to know whether something is an innovation: Continuous flow of new things coming out makes it difficult for journalist to distinguish which they should consider “true” innovations. They claim little expertise in technical matters, thus having to rely on other assurances on innovations.
6. Innovation is part of a web of interests: Most of the journalists of the study discuss how innovation is a collaborative effort, how it involves various participants, and that it happens in a context of various influences. In other words, it happens in an ecosystem. It may involve e.g. academia, policy, finance elements, competitors or other firms.

Our summary findings for the study are then:

- There is evidence of rich, ecosystem type of models of ‘innovation’
- Focus of the journalists is on what is ‘novel’ and what are the ways to engage the reader interest
- As innovations are not easy to pin down, journalists are concerned how to recognise an innovation and how to know what authority to use to define innovation
- There are diverse views of how much to focus on ‘innovation’, how much on the ‘system’

- While there is variation in the journalism space, no patterns are immediately explicit in terms of innovation definitions and occupational boundaries
- Journalists see themselves as dependent on other specialists in innovation-related stories
- 'Tech'-identified journalists see innovation arising from technology but linked to other aspects, like business, social and environmental issues
- There is mixed support for specialty InJo beat

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