

# Innovation journalism - making innovation a common language

**Speech by European Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK,**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good day. And - of course - I want to start by thanking for the opportunity to speak here. I learned about innovation journalism from David Nordfors not long ago in Brussels. Of course, since I am for innovation and have experience of journalism I was enthusiastic from the very beginning.

This is my first speech on innovation journalism, and I hope it will not be my last.

I encourage innovation journalism for one simple reason - it increases understanding of the value of knowledge. And to get the political, financial and public support for knowledge, it needs to be better understood.

It is very rare that people support something they do not understand - as Albert Einstein showed, when he said: "The hardest thing to understand in the world is... income tax"!

Innovation journalism is all about improving communication, which can in turn increase recognition for innovation. As a politician, I can assure you that recognition can usually be counted in Euros and Cents - so the higher innovation's profile and understanding, the easier it is to find financial support for it.

We at the European Commission have seen very recently the value of communication. We recognize that the negative results of the European Constitution referendums in France and the Netherlands two years ago were connected also with inadequate communication.

Our response has been to launch a so-called Plan D - for dialogue, democracy and debate. Now we know at least that if people still vote against a European idea, it will not be because of insufficient communication.

The European Constitution was about taking the European institutions forward. But in the EU, we should also consider innovation likewise important. It is about taking modern economies forward. It is not a marginal, or specific interest, or story. It is one that actually affects most people. That is what we have to tell editors and producers - that our interest is actually in their interest.

From my knowledge of journalism and that of my staff, I know that editors are so valued, and hopefully highly paid, because they have the clearest idea of what interests their readers. They are, in effect, the 'reader in chief' of their publication. And specializing in the main interest areas of their readers is their job.

So a left wing magazine cannot be expected to publish the same stories as a right wing newspaper. A technical journal will not take the same angle as a business trade magazine. And so on.

Our task is to show all of these levels of journalism that innovation is an umbrella which covers many of these areas - that it cannot be categorized through traditional subjects or treated in the old ways. It is

an integral part of many different parts of society: in business and in schools, in governments and in laboratories, in Europe and of course also elsewhere.

I'd like to illustrate innovation's role with an old story. It involves three blind men, who are taken on a visit to a zoo for the first time. Their guide takes them to an elephant's cage. He asks them to touch the elephant and tell him what it looks like.

The first blind man at the front is holding the elephant's trunk and says: 'An elephant is a bit like a snake'

The second blind man, who is holding a leg says: 'No, no, an elephant is like a tall, thick tree.'

The third blind man, who is holding the tail, says: 'No, an elephant is thin and hairy'.

Who was right? Well, none of the blind men was wrong. But none of them had the full picture.

In today's world, innovation is that elephant. We all approach it from different angles and have different perspectives. And innovation journalism is the ability to see the whole elephant.

A second point that I would like to make today is that innovation needs to be given greater importance, as well as also visibility. I'd like to illustrate this by telling you about what happened on August 6.

On August 6 last century, two events took place, 46 years apart. The first event was one of the most destructive ever. The second event was one of the most creative ever.

The first was August 6, 1945 - the day the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The second was August 6, 1991 - the day the first website was posted by the World Wide Web's creator, Tim Berners-Lee.

Look at the different media coverage of those two events. The first, unsurprisingly, was covered around the world. It not only meant the most powerful bomb ever had been created, it also meant the imminent end of the second world and over 100.000 casualties on a single day.

The second event received virtually no coverage - or at least that we know about. It was a marginal technological event for many. And there is little point in scanning the Internet for media coverage of that day because, of course, the Internet [as a news medium] did not yet exist!

And yet, the impact of both events was enormous for the world. Politically, August 6 1945 brought about a change in direction for the whole world. But so did August 6 1991. Now, 16 years later, there are over 100 million websites, e-commerce is a major part of most economies and most of us use the Internet for everything from buying to blogs.

And that is the key point. Innovation journalism is not just about new technology, not about just research results or business applications. It's about joining all of these together.

It's no longer good enough to talk about a scientific breakthrough without telling us why this is important in the market place. And it's no longer good enough to talk about increasing market share of products without telling us how R&D has achieved this.

This calls for either a new type of journalist - or more realistically, a new approach in journalism.

There are not many people who can claim to be good at writing. There are even less who can claim to be good at science and technology. And there are not many business people who have the time for either of these.

But an overview approach to innovation is what is needed. And this requires a new way of training and practicing journalism in innovation.

As usual, this is all about having the right people and giving them the right tools. At European level, our Seventh Framework Programme has specific actions in its Capacities programme for journalists. And the

European Commission's DG Research is currently looking into the level of science and innovation journalism around Europe.

Here in Slovenia, I am pleased to see that the National Slovenian Technology Agency has already started supporting three projects on innovation journalism.

I hope that these and further national and European initiatives will play a role in reinforcing the role of innovation journalism.

Ladies and Gentlemen, As I mentioned at the beginning, innovation journalism is all about recognition - recognition of innovation's role, recognition of knowledge's importance, recognition of how innovation works. Today's event is about recognising those who have done this job best.

I am pleased we have arrived at the stage where we can provide awards to these winners in innovation. This can always take some time.

Although the first website was uploaded about 16 years ago, the first Weby awards - the Oscars of websites - only took place in 1999.

The Webbys is an innovative ceremony. Award winners are only allowed to use only five words in their acceptance speeches.

This year, the science winner said: 'Houston, we have a winner.' An artist winner said: 'Can anyone fix my computer?'. And in the lifetime achievement award, David Bowie said: 'I only get five words?'

This sums up the new approach to journalism in the innovation age. Information has to be short, sharp and succinct. And preferably, memorable.

Journalism is changing more than we realise. Websites have to be catchier. Articles have to dig deeper. And speeches have to be shorter!

And so I will finish mine now by wishing you all luck in making innovation, knowledge and research better understood and recognised.

Thank you.