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Innovation Journalism

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Innovation journalism (InJo) is journalism covering innovations. It refers to journalism that focuses on reporting how innovations happen in societies, and emphasizes the importance of providing precise language and illustrative narratives that enable public discussions about new technological trends and their social implications. In addition, InJo has a future orientation and an objective of using new digital tools for journalistic storytelling. InJo as a reform movement was in its heyday from 2004 to 2011.

Horizontal Approach

To understand innovation processes, a journalist needs to draw knowledge from several different special fields such as technology, economics, politics, science, culture, and law. In this respect, InJo challenges traditional news beat systems. It aims at producing thought-provoking and critical journalism about complex topics such as nanoscience, laser technology, the Internet of Things, and medicine. Ultimately, InJo is a reformation movement for technology and business journalism.

InJo is interested in different levels of processes. At the micro level, an article could focus on a solo innovator or team of innovators, one innovation process, or one innovative company or organization. At the macro level, more general approaches as well as broader themes are reported such as industry-wide perspectives, innovation ecosystems' analyzes, or national innovation strategies. An article on a development process, for instance, might focus on the development of a new drug and its introduction to the market, while an article analyzing a local business ecosystem could describe the clean technology (cleantech) sector in California's Silicon Valley.

The term innovation journalism was coined by Swedish physicist David Nordfors in 2003, when he was working at the Swedish Agency for Innovation Systems (Vinnova). Nordfors was among the first to notice that even if technological and social innovations were argued to be key drivers of economic growth globally, journalists in general did not cover topics that were related to innovation processes. According to Nordfors, innovations fell between many traditional news beats.

InJo Fellowship Program as the Main Tester

To test the InJo concept in practice, whether innovation could be its own news beat or not, Nordfors's employer Vinnova started to fund a special InJo program. It consisted of academic research and a fellowship program initially aimed at educating mid-career Swedish technology and economic reporters as innovation journalists. Later mid-career journalists from Finland, Slovenia, Mexico, and Pakistan joined the International Innovation Journalism fellowship program.

From 2004 to 2011, the InJo Fellowship Program was affiliated with the Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning (SCIL) and hosted by Stig Hagström (1932–2011), a professor emeritus of materials science and engineering. Later SCIL was first merged to industry partners program, Media X-program, and finally to the H-STAR (Human Sciences and Technologies Advanced Research) Institute at Stanford. Situated in the heart of Silicon Valley, the InJo Fellowship Program had a vantage point on the world's leading innovation ecosystem. It lasted 5 to 6 months annually, from spring to early fall, and was divided into three phases.

The program started with an introductory period at Stanford University, then was held off-campus at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI). After academic lectures, discussions, and company excursions, the fellows joined different hosting U.S. newsrooms, mainly in the West and East coasts. For example, Bloomberg, Fortune magazine, the San Francisco Chronicle, PC World, CNET, Red Herring, and VentureBeat hosted several InJo fellows. Finally, the fellows co-organized with founding Executive Director David Nordfors the Innovation Journalism Conference at Stanford.

The conference consisted of keynote talks, paper presentations, panel and round-table discussions, and workshops. All the fellows' papers and academic research papers were published in an open access publication Innovation Journalism (Innovationjournalism.org). Many of Silicon Valley's innovation veterans and luminaries contributed to the conference, for example SRI's Douglas Engelbart and Google's Vint Cerf.

Also, prominent Silicon Valley-based tech reporters such as The New York Times' John Markoff, the San Jose Mercury News' Dan Gillmor, and ABC News' Michael S. Malone gave keynote talks or participated in the panel discussions.

The annual Innovation Journalism Conference acted as the center of a social network interested in developing InJo activities around the world. It attracted not only journalists but professionals from higher education to public policymakers and public relations. For example, Slovenian entrepreneur and politician Violeta Bulc contributed to several InJo conferences. She acted later, for example, as the European Commissioner for Transport (2014–2019).

Innovation Journalism, an open access publication, served as the main communication platform for journalism fellows and other developers. As often happens with new initiatives and ventures, several "schools" were created during the active years of the InJo program, all having slightly different emphases. For example, in Germany the focus was mainly on innovation communication, whereas in Finland the importance of social innovations and future orientation were highlighted.

The InJo Fellowship Program was followed closely by academic scholars. Several rounds of interviews and content analysis were conducted during the active years of the program. Based on the results of these studies, almost all the fellows were critical toward the idea that InJo could be a new beat in the newsrooms. According to the fellows, innovations were considered too complicated, long-lasting processes to become its own journalistic beat. In similar fashion, a content analysis of 410 InJo stories made in 2004–2008 by 38 fellows showed that their work was still quite close to that of traditional business and economy reporters. News was clearly the main genre of the fellows' stories, big technology companies dominated as sources, and the future-orientation was rather weak. However, the fellows actively tested new digital tools and applications such as blogs in their reporting.

During its tenure, the fellowship program educated about 50 mid-career journalists, mainly from Sweden and Finland, but also some journalists from Slovenia, Mexico, and Pakistan. After their fellowships, many journalists advanced in their journalism careers while others changed their professions to work in public relations or as academic researchers and educators. Based on several rounds of research interviews, one common pattern for example among the Finnish InJo fellows was to change their jobs after the return to their home country.

Learnings and Legacies

In the end, InJo did not get enough support in the newsrooms as its own news beat. Especially after the financial crisis of 2007–2008, specialist reporting from foreign reporting to science journalism seemed to be too expensive and luxurious, suitable only for the most resourceful news organizations.

However, the interplay of innovation and journalism did resonate for example with other reform movements such as constructive journalism and data journalism. In addition, educationally speaking, Stanford University's John S. Knight Fellowship program transformed its curriculum successfully toward innovations in journalism at the turn of the 2010s.

InJo was introduced as a new academic research area for journalism studies via annual Stanford conferences, which had its own academic tracks from 2006 to 2011. In addition, InJo as a new concept in journalism studies was introduced at the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conferences in 2008 in Stockholm, Sweden, and in 2010 in Braga, Portugal. After these conferences, IAMCR started to pay more attention to the importance of innovations in journalism studies. The need for constant adaptation and innovativeness are an essential part of the survival strategies of many news organizations. In this way, InJo, at least a small part, paved the way for the contemporary journalism studies via emphasizing the importance of the interplay of innovations and journalism.

After the InJo program ended in 2011, many national InJo initiatives, which were funded by different national foundations, started to fade away. For example, in Finland, the Association for Innovation Journalism was founded as the first and only of its kind in the world in the year 2007. During its active years, the Finnish InJo

Association organized several meetings and excursions for its members. Until the year 2012, the association awarded annually InJo crystals for the best innovation stories published in Finland. The awarded stories were long reads or series published by national or regional newspapers. Their topics varied from environmental reporting to local clusters of new tech companies. The association was discontinued in 2017.

Clearly, InJo as a practice demands more time than average news reporting to fulfill all its ambitious aims. To understand often long-lasting innovation processes, long reads, feature formats, and series would better suit InJo than short news bites.

Perhaps, the best examples of contemporary InJo one can find regularly are from the British magazine *The Economist* (it calls itself a “newspaper”). *The Economist*, uncommonly, has its own research staff at the Economist Intelligence Unit that provides thoughtful pieces often mixing economics, politics, and culture in order to understand certain industries or societal processes. In addition, *The Economist* publishes annually a special future-oriented issue; the 35th edition was “The World in 2021.”

See also [Business Journalism](#); [Constructive Journalism](#); [Data Journalism](#); [Digital Journalism Tools](#); [Google; Journalism Education](#); [Longform Journalism](#); [Science and Technology Journalism](#)

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