

Establishing media innovation as a research arena

Tanja Storsul & Arne H. Krumsvik (editors)

Title: *Media innovations: A multidisciplinary study of change*

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Pity the poor edited book, an oft-misbegotten artefact of good intentions. Readers regularly expect a coherent collection, as well as an archetypal relic of inconsistent writing, scholarly myopia, imprecise narrative, episodic concentration, indeterminate achievement, and fragmented interests. Worse still, many efforts fall regrettably even shorter, culminating in meagre meandering mishmash of misanthropic musings and malarkey.

And then there is *Media Innovations*.

Establishing media innovation as a research arena independent of mere commercial concern, editors Storsul and Krumsvik successfully tap the spirit of the University of Oslo's inaugural International Symposium on Media Innovations in 2012 to present 16 seemingly disparate studies that not only present a range of advances, but illustrate a larger point: only by looking at the range, and by understanding its diverse nature do we get a sense of the greater whole that awaits an unsuspecting and unappreciative industry.

The editors attempt to set the tone in their initial chapter, underscoring key stimuli in the usual suspects of technology, market opportunities and user behaviour, competition, regulation, industry patterns, corporate tactics, leadership, structure, capacities and assets, and cultural influences. But they lose an opportunity to give the reader a sense of what is to come by doing exactly that – dwelling instead on the divisions of the book (concepts, structure and management, and services and users) and masterfully understating the book's "broader perspective," as if they themselves aren't entirely sure of how to sum the whole.

"The lens of innovation theory," they modestly write (25), "is a valuable tool for understanding current developments in the media landscape, the sociocultural conditions of the innovations, the role of technology, and power relations in media development."

This leaves the casual reader at the mercy of each of the chapters, which – while individually offering something worthwhile to almost *any individual reader*

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and communication scholar – nonetheless (by virtue of their sheer multidisciplinary temperament) collectively offer a challenge of Medusan proportions. As so many snakes, nothing and everything stands out.

But that's a slight exaggeration. Leyla Dogruel's initiating volley on how media management scholars and practitioners currently view innovation provides not only a thorough critique of extant literature but further plants the germ for the reader's openness toward the notion of innovation as more than product or process and into the realm of something deeper. Call it "innovation as communicative act," if you will.

This fed into my favourite chapter, Steen Steensen's thoughtful plea for balancing the transformation and practice perspectives in innovation research. Whereas transformative views are outsider-oriented and prefaces the new in the context of the old, Steensen argues we use such a lens at our peril; practitioners and media organizational structures serve as more than constraints – they are enablers. Media workers' agency transforms structure within the organization to diffuse an innovation, he writes (55). New and traditional editors alike would do well to listen to Steensen, rather than see themselves as the willing and acquiescent dupes as they are so often portrayed in the blogosphere and some parts of academia.

The varying cases and interpretations of the innovative frame ensue, ranging from – in the section on structure and management – studies of size and ownership influences in Norwegian newspaper publishers' approach to iPad strategy, to an evaluation of Flemish broadcasting innovation policy, to Danish government privacy practices. A similar range occurs in the "services and users" section, but therein lies the beauty of the book: particularly helpful insight arises from being open to areas in which one has little expertise.

For example, while I was thankful to imbibe Piet Bakker's analysis of recent workable and not-so-workable Dutch newspaper innovations, Charles H. Davis' discussion of "transmedia" – media firms' attempts to the repurposing and augmentation of original content into new channels and platforms – sparkles in taking the audience view of the actual value of such efforts. Davis delves into the fan mind-set and approach toward engagement to uncover an important scholarly question: "how to understand various modes, degrees, kinds and dynamics of audience engagement" (185). Imagine many current media executives actually trying to do so (no irony intended)!

And in that spirit, Iris Jenne and Jo Pierson provide further insight into the television advertising world. Albeit focusing on the Flemish and Belgian scene, their analysis could just as simply be relevant to any culture; uncovering institutionalized resistance to innovation rooted in power conflicts, ignorance, jealousy and fear of losing first-mover advantages that digital improvements likely promise. Again, with no irony intended, the authors show how these "professionals" actually see precise audience measurement as a "threat" (202-203).

As broad as it is conceptually, *Media Innovations* likewise runs the gamut of methods. Case studies certainly dominate, but within many of those cases the reader finds statistical range and rigor as well. Perhaps the most unique chapter in this regard is Gunnar Liestøl's examination of digital media design: starting with a modern-day classical rhetoric reading, Liestøl illustrates how..., well, emerging media can be adjusted with a simple eye toward design and how it provides alternative views. Suffice it to say that the chapter is highly technical and precise but simultaneously visually literate.

In that regard, Liestøl's work is a microcosm of *Media Innovations*, gently pushing the reader's horizons. While at times you may feel as if you have over-indulged a particular author, he/she/they inevitably find their way to saying something worthwhile.

So whether it is to understand the motivations of those trying to learn the a particular minority language in Ireland via social media, or instead to gain an inside look at a French citizen-run freelance photojournalism cooperative, *Media Innovations* adheres to the question that introductory author Lucy Küng places among the key challenges of media innovation: which of the myriad developments on the horizon at any one point should we react to?

The *Media Innovations* reader constantly faces that question, but in so doing understands it as a statement as well.

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