Modernizing the Assembly Line

Arne H. Krumsvik
*The Online News Factory: A Multi-Lens Investigation of the Strategy, Structure, and Process of Online News Production at CNN and NRK.*
Oslo: Institutt for medier og kommunikasjon, Universitetet i Oslo 2009.

The purposes, methods, and operation of online news provision are the focus of Arne Krumsvik’s dissertation, which seeks to discover underlying factors in the decision-making and implementation of digital strategies in news enterprises. His use of «news factory» in the title underscores its emphasis on production aspects of enterprises, rather than on content itself, even though it is likely to disturb those who see journalism more as an art or craft.

The study compares two highly different organizations — CNN and NRK — and offers good descriptions of the organizations, their activities, their strategies, and their practices. Comparing such different enterprises is an exercise fraught with peril because of the challenges of comparing a commercial, global, cable-based enterprise from a large country with a non-commercial, domestic, over-the-air broadcasting organization from a small country. Nevertheless, Krumsvik manages to do so by showing that such factors are less important in explaining choices and implementation of online activities than others.

To do so, the author employs multi-lens investigation, a technique that has not been widely used in previous decades but is becoming more common in the social sciences and humanities. It provides for greater breadth of inquiry and discovery of useful explanations early in the study of a phenomenon. It does so, of course, at the sacrifice of depth of inquiry.

Krumsvik uses the lenses of strategic management, product portfolios, and news sociology in his study. The bases of the three lenses differ widely, emanating from business, finance, sociology, and media theory and literature, but they are not as fully independent or mutually exclusive as some might think, because they all seek to explain decision-making and behavior. The choice of lenses is appropriate for application to emerging online practices of news organizations. The dissertation provides a good introduction to the literature and major elements of the three approaches that is useful for those without a strong grounding in them.

Using the strategic perspective, the study shows that CNN was a first mover and leader in online news activity and that its initial efforts were primarily experimental and decentralized across its organization. Ultimately, it mainstreamed and centralized its online operations for efficiency. NRK was a follower, a latecomer by comparison, and swiftly created a relatively centralized system. Krumsvik argues that although the initial paths differed, the strategic rationales for both firms were similar and that they were intent on using online news provision as a defensive mechanism to maintain their existing positions as news providers.

Krumsvik then explores activities through the lens of product portfolios, showing that both firms approached online news as a means of achieving breadth of
service that would extend their reach and serve audiences on different platforms in different ways rather than activities based on risk reduction, life cycle, or market exploitation rationales.

Ultimately, the study turns to news sociology attempting to determine how multi-platform journalism practice affects journalistic production, i.e. the work of journalists. It shows that despite differences in the organizations both implemented changes to promote cross-platform distribution and the creation of multimedia news packages, but that they did not fundamentally challenge the roles or identities of journalists.

Krumsvik uses his findings to suggest that strategists' approaches to portfolios play significant roles in determining how their firms will operate in and across the traditional and online worlds and influence the organizational structures they put into place for journalistic activity.

This is an interesting study on how business decisions shape innovation and product development in news organizations. In the end, however, it is more a descriptive than a theoretical dissertation and does not significantly help predict behavior of other companies. However, it raises interesting questions for the reader. Are most news organizations strategically driven in their online activities or are they merely imitating others? How do the rationales for the varying approaches in the three lenses create paradoxes and tensions within news organizations by pulling or pushing them in different directions? Is it possible for firms to be fully rational when making decisions about emerging technologies or market developments? What is the best way to structure news activities across product platforms? Should journalists be passive or active participants in organizational strategy?

The dissertation is not the definitive work on these issues, but it does build a foundation for further research.

Robert G. Picard, professor
Internationella Handelshögskolan, Högskolan i Jönköping
E-post: Robert.Picard@ihh.hj.se

På gjengrodde stier?

Sara Brinch og Anne Gjelsvik (red.)
Veier tilbake. Filmhistoriske perspektiver
Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2009

Veier tilbake. Filmhistoriske perspektiver er et velkommen tilskudd til den ikke altfor omfattende norske litteraturen om film, og den første i sitt slag i norsk sammenheng: Den handler om «hvordan man skaper filmhistorie – hvordan filmhistorien settes sammen, skrives og forstås.» Det passer derfor godt at Veier tilbake også er et festskrift i anledning professor Gunnar Iversens 50-årsdag. Få har vært – og er