A fresh look at innovation in online journalism

Steen Steensen

*Back to the feature: Online journalism as innovation, transformation and practice*

Doktoravhandling, Oslo: Unipub, 2010

Much of the research on online newsrooms has focused on the cultural and material constraints of breaking news production, which foster fast, low-quality and mimetic reporting (Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Boczkowski, 2010). Steensen provides a much needed new angle to online journalism research in his dissertation: The development of feature, in-depth reporting for the Web. His study has the value of shedding light to an often neglected aspect of online news, but is even more relevant because feature journalism can be understood as the core of innovativeness in online newsrooms, the genre that is not tied to the pressure of immediacy and therefore may open more clear opportunities to explore the potential of Internet storytelling. Steensen, with a theoretically innovative and methodologically sound approach proves how the professional values of the online newsroom also strongly shape the definition of feature journalism for the Web, reducing some of the core characteristics of the genre in print publishing and highlighting those that more easily fit the online journalism ethos. Instead of highly personal and empathic with the sources, feature online journalism in the analyzed newsroom was based on desk journalism with an emphasis on productivity rather than quality or depth.

The book, a very well organized collection of articles introduced by a theoretical discussion, is based on a newsroom ethography of *Magasinet online*, the features section of *dagbladet.no*. It included six weeks of direct observation of the work practices during two years (2005-2007), interviews with 14 journalists and editors, and a content analysis of 60 feature stories. The longitudinal approach, observing the newsroom for a long period of time, is a very wise research design strategy, very much needed in a changing object of study such as online journalism. And analyzing the text of articles is a very effective complement to the observation of work practices.

The work of Steensen is based on a refutation of techno-determinism as the explanation for innovation in newrooms. The idea of treating «innovation» as a discourse and not only as a process is very intriguing and promising. The industry and scholars have adopted innovation as a motto, and that has powerful consequences on their practices. The author should develop this idea further in future studies. He-defends, as most of the ethnographic approaches to this topic, that the social context of the newsroom, its rules and practices, shape the news products and the way the Internet is used as a publishing platform. Nonetheless, Steensen goes a step further and proposes focusing on genre development and on individual agency as key aspects to understand the emergence of feature journalism. So far, work practices and structural factors had been the main objects of study of online
news ethnographies. Taking these practices as the context, the focus on genre and the theorization of its evolution widen the theoretical framework of journalism studies. Before, work practices and genres were separate areas of enquiry. This study does a great job in bridging these two aspects and demonstrating the close relationship they have. Considering genres as the product of social action, of a community of practice (journalists and users in this case) is a very fruitful approach to assess their evolution. On the other hand, the author demonstrates through empirical evidence how individual agency plays a crucial role in innovation processes, as much as structural factors. In some passages of the book it seems that the author insists in the role of individual agency to counter the undeniable understatement it has suffered in previous research. Overall, one ends up finding a position that invites to explore the interrelated relationship between agency and structure in innovation processes.

The effort of the researcher to generate theoretical structures out of the case study is commendable, it articulates what he has learnt from the case into much needed reflections that can be useful for future research. Online journalism research needs more theorisation, and this work is a great contribution in that direction. However, the references to the theory of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003) are not the strongest contribution of Steensen. The theory has already been applied to journalism studies in other studies, with little explanatory power regarding the configurations of innovations, but rather the speed and resistance (or not) to change in the newsrooms. In fact, the two articles dealing specifically with innovation (5 and 6) are not based on diffusion theory, but rather in a more grounded approach that is very effective in identifying specific factors for the development of feature online journalism. The five factors identified by Steensen building upon previous research are meaningful and relevant, with more explanatory power than Rogers’ theory: online newsroom autonomy, newsroom work culture, representation of the audience, the role of management and the relevance of new technology.

**David Domingo**, Senior Lecturer
Department of Communication Studies, Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona, Catalonia)
E-post: david.domingo@urv.cat

**References**

