
Tore Roksvolds kapittel om retorikk bryter noe med formen i resten av boken. Det er et svært teoretisk kapittel, noe som selv sagt langt på vei må tilskrives temaets karakter, men her er det valgt et vanskeligere språk enn kravet til presisjon krever. Det er fullt mulig å formidle teoretiske fremstillinger forståelige er å eksemplifisere. Det siste kapittelet om visuell kultur (Anne Hege Simonsen) er et godt eksempel på det. Bildedteori og kunsthistorie er heller ikke enkelt stoff å formidle til nye studenter, men det gjøres likevel på en forbilledlig måte i dette kapittelet, ikke minst ved at forfatteren eksemplifiserer. Simonsen viser hele tiden til bilder og eksempler som leserne kjenner igjen og kan identifisere seg med.

Oppsummeringsmessig kan vi se at dette er ei bok med ambisjon om å gi et første innblikk i medievitenskapens mangfoldige teorier og perspektiver uten at studentene må ha forkunnskaper verken innenfor kunsthistorie, politisk teori eller filmteori. Denne ambisjonen har redaktøren etter min opptatning langt på veg klart å innfri ved at forfatterne har evnet å knytte de ulike teoretiske og forskningsmessige bidragene til en konkret medievirkelighet. Antologien vil helt klart bli å finne på pensumlista til bachelorstudentene i journalistikk i Bodø.

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Innovation as an empty process

Editors: Tanja Storsul, Arne H. Krumsvik
Media Innovations. A Multidisciplinary Study of Change
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The book is the first from the ambitious Centre of Research on Media Innovations (CeRMI) at the University of Oslo. Innovation theory will help established media research to better “understand and explain current developments in the media landscape”, the editors claim in the introduction (p. 7). This ambition for innova-
tion theory is good, but not good enough. Below, I will carefully fold out my criticism.

Media Innovations has seventeen articles that have been eased into three rather vaguely titled main sections: Concepts, Structure and management and Services and users. My first impression is that this is a really useful book. The articles in this anthology all teach me something new and interesting about what “innovation” is supposed to be, and at the end of the book I have a much better understanding of my own position concerning this supposition. It deals concretely with the media landscape in Norway and other countries, and at least indirectly it provides advice about how to innovate better. At this pedagogic, introductory level the anthology works very well, especially when they operationalize the concept of “innovation” and make empirical studies to gauge its prevalence in Norway, Flanders, the UK and other countries. The methods are sound, and the empirical studies by for example Piet Bakker (Technical University Utrecht) can safely be repeated in other countries, by a new generation of master students, and expanded to more topics. Many of the articles will probably be put on reading lists, and be referenced among students and researchers in this growing network.

Media Innovations has a management and economics perspective, and this should have been advertised better in the title. It does not deal as broadly with its key words as you would expect, especially not the big word “change”. There are no studies of the philosophical and scientific conditions for change, such as cause and effect, nor any reception studies of changing media conditions in everyday life, or the return of the ever same. I expected a richer collection of topics, theories and methods, and was a little disappointed. However, their implicitly shared definition of “innovation” is too narrow and specialized to be truly enlightening.

Innovation theory deals with “innovation” rather than “invention”. An invention is the creation of a new device, idea or theoretical model, while an innovation is the successful implementation of this invention in a market or a social setting. Innovation is a much more complex political and economic phenomenon than invention. The overall perspective of innovation theory is presented in two introductory articles by Küng, and Storsul and Krumsvik, and I will briefly mention the most central concepts and authors. The economist Joseph Schumpeter is a central writer in innovation theory, especially the term “creative destruction” from the 1930s. He said that sometimes, new technologies change the playing field of business so totally that established companies go under and upstarts rise to power. Christensen’s The Innovator’s Dilemma has a similar approach in a contemporary setting. A most spectacular example of this process is the giant US company Kodak. It was unable to adjust from analogue to digital reproduction of photographs and went bankrupt in 2012.

Two other theories are also widely cited in the book. One is a categorization of the newness of an invention distinguishing between incremental, modular, architectural and radical innovation. Another is a categorization of what an innovation consists of, distinguishing between four P’s of innovation; product, process,
position and paradigm. Forgive me for not presenting them in detail, but this is actually representative of the way they are used in the book. Everybody presumes that everybody knows what is entailed in these concepts; while the truth may be that everybody is confused about their use value.

There is no doubt that these theories can engender good analyses. The two editors plus Eli Skogerbø have written a paradigmatic example of mainstream innovation theory. In “Size, Ownership and Innovation in Newspapers” innovation is measured as the degree to which the organization had launched or was planning to launch an iPad-service. They find that large media companies which are owned by an ownership group have the strongest stimulus for innovation (p. 97), while small, independent newspapers are less change-oriented. These findings may be depressing for the business sector, but the scholarship is sound and everybody can move forward with this insight in their briefcase. Still, I was left wanting more explanation and interpretation. What are the implications of the newly established fact that smaller media don’t innovate as much? Or do they perhaps innovate in other ways, not in the form of a new technology, but as new journalistic working relations that emerge from the newsroom floor and don’t really require a new technology.

Piet Bakker also operationalizes innovation, and he does it in a “budgetary” economic perspective. In the article “Measuring Innovation. Successes and Failures in a Newspaper Market” the success of an innovation is measured in sales figures. The more copies you sell, the more innovative you are. This is a market-oriented approach that is clearly very useful to the Netherlands’ newspaper industry, but which doesn’t bring the understanding of media innovation much further.

Sabine Baumann in “Adapting to the Brave New World. Innovative Organisational Strategies for Media Companies” writes in a management vocabulary from European high finance without explaining any of the concepts. Although I think the editors should have left it out for being too specialized, it is quite interesting to notice the clarity of an instrumental or empiricist view of the media. “Besides fulfilling the economic promise of being cost-efficient and/or generating profits, media products and services also bear a considerable cultural dimension in that they have to respond to the value objectives of society” (p. 78). It’s a very good sentence except for the implication of the “besides”. I don’t believe that the cultural dimension will never be first priority in mainstream economic perspectives on innovation.

After reading Baumann’s article I was struck by a sense of emptiness. So the media are just another product or service, and innovation is just an improvement of cost-efficiency. Innovation is presented as an empty process, instead of as concrete historical events. Most authors simply don’t mention the existential, social or cultural significance of media innovations, at least not in any substantial way. It is taken for granted, and therefore underestimated as a force for, or impediment against, innovation.

To me it seems that the greatest force for innovation is human and not economical, and that innovation must be studied in human terms too. Creativity is
picked up better in the term invention than innovation. Invention refers more directly to the creation of a device, technology or artefact, and this process is often undisciplined, with blatant disregard for the “normal” ways of doing things. It is less utilitarian, less effective and less strategic than innovation. Happily, some of the articles have a more cultural approach, and I will present them in some detail.

Gunnar Liestøl’s article is the only one that deals directly with invention, as the title makes clear: “Topics of Innovation. Towards a Method of Invention and Innovation in Digital Media Design”. Over the years Liestøl has created several digital media designs for the purposes of learning about museum sites and ancient history. In recent years he has been working with Situated Simulations; a visual AR display for showing the original condition of Osebergskipet, Forum Romanum, and other ancient structures and events. His practical definition of invention is that it is a “technique for systematic probing of the expressive potential in emerging media” (p. 64). He is highly critical of the humanities for not taking up more inventive methods of research, and “move from the role of analytical observation in hindsight and instead become proactively participant in furthering the processes of innovation by means of both digital media design and textual interpretations” (p. 62).

Kjartan Müller in the article “Innovation and the Genre-Platform Model” argues convincingly that genre is an important concept for innovation theory. He combines medium theory with genre theory to argue that media (in general) have a design space with particular already developed design patterns, and in this space there is room for constant innovation. Sometimes a technological platform is replaced without any striking innovation in the genre. Wikipedia looks very much like a traditional encyclopedia, but is in technological terms a radical innovation. Müller develops a prototype “enhanced ebook” to test out genre aspects, and this proactive approach owes much to Liestøl’s model.

A team from the University of Ottawa (Shtern et al.) contribute with the article “Historiographic Innovation. How the Past Explains the Future of Social Media Services”. It is a highly critical account of how centralized the web industry has become, with companies such as Facebook, Google and Apple serving as particularly negative examples. As a contrast, they discuss the decentralized Federated Social Web, an initiative with links to Tim Berners-Lee and the W3 Consortium. The authors analyse the historical emergence of the semantic web and Web 2.0, and prefer the latter because it is more open-ended. The semantic web relies on ontologies that must be used by everybody in the same way, and this is an implicit centralization that the authors reject. Smaller companies and institutions need ways to expand that are not based on centralization, and the Federated Social Web has weak links between the nodes, and avoids the dilemmas of the giant companies. The authors’ “historiographical innovation” is a method that aims to learn from historical mistakes in a given innovation process, and return to earlier paths to see if they can yield constructive results under the present conditions. This is a quite radical approach, and the article very engaging to read.
In the political sense this book pretends to be value free, and does it well. This is by the way also the case with most other publications in the genre of academic research. The book is (mainly) guided by what could be called an “administrative” approach to research, originally coined by Paul Lazarsfeld. The researcher strives for neutrality, and cultivates or constructs an “objective reality” that we can all relate pragmatically to because it is to a large extent predictable. Innovation goes on in any event, but the challenge is to harness it in an understandable language, and to operationalize and measure it, so that it can be compared with other countries, and work as a basis for investments, policies, and laws. Administrative researchers mainly study the innovation of other actors in society; whether it is a business like local newspapers or a state institution. There is little need to ask complex questions about the motives for and consequences of a given innovation (e.g. Facebook). This is a no-nonsense, empiricist form of research that is very valuable for strategists in commercial companies and state departments alike.

This brings me to the last point of criticism. “Innovation” is a strong actant in the university-commercial complex these days. There is an entire industry related to R & D. Government departments and university leaders all expect innovation from the universities and businesses, and financing of research is geared towards innovation. There is a growing institutional market for innovation centres, not least in the field of ICTs, social media, newspapers and television. One would expect management and economics scholars to be well positioned to do interesting research on this, and indeed they do. But in my perspective the approach is too limited. It mainly presents innovation as an empty process that can be used by anyone for any purpose, and this is not good enough.

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