MEVIT4310 – Media Innovations
Exam and examiner guidelines, spring 2018

Note: The exam assignment text is in bold, while the grading guideline for each question follows below.

Question 1:
Discuss the role of technological development for media innovations. Next, explain why Feenberg would remind us of considering technology as value-laden and humanly controlled.

Technology and (media) innovation are inseparably linked. Storsul and Krumsvik list technology as the first influence on media innovations: new opportunities, foundation for new products and services, but technological development also represents challenges to existing business models.

Yet whereas technology and innovation are linked, we should, following Feenberg, avoid considering technological development as a neutral and autonomous force:

Technology as value-laden: a perspective on technological development in opposition to determinist views that minimize our power to control technical development. Technical means are here considered to be neutral insofar as they merely fulfil natural needs. Technical progress as a tale of inevitable progress following a fixed path from less to more advanced technological configurations. Each stage of technological development enables the next, and technological development follows a single sequence of necessary stages.

Technology as humanly controlled: Feenberg argues that technology is not autonomous and that society does not simply adopt the imperatives of the technological basis. Additionally, humans are not governed solely by rationality. Which means that a rational criterion such as technical efficiency does not in itself account for the success of some innovations and the failure of others.

The ultimate path a technology takes: hence determined as much by politics, cultural norms, user agency and everyday practices as by technical limitations and economic imperatives.

Plus-points if students also explain the notions of underdetermination and closure and explain that Feenberg's position also implies that technological development is a site of political struggle: it matters what configuration technology ends up taking. And once technology reaches closure it becomes difficult to see the final and fixed stage as other than inevitable. Extra plus points for bringing in the distinction of high-tech, medium-tech and low-tech from Fagerberg.

Question 2
We can distinguish between types of media innovations along two dimensions: aspect of innovation (what is changing) and degree of novelty. Using these two

dimensions, explain the main types of media innovations. Give examples of each type.

Storsul and Krumsvik builds on Francis and Bessant for the first dimension:

Product/service: the introduction of a new good or a service in the market, including the introduction of a new quality of a good or service.

Process: changes in the ways in which products/services are created and delivered, or new or significantly improved way of doing things in a business that typically increases production levels and decreases costs. Process innovation might come in the form of new processes or techniques, new equipment or software. Ford's assembly line typically emphasized as one of the world's most significant process innovation – with clear parallels in the media industries.

Position: changes in the context in which the products/services are introduced. The mobile phone as an example of a product where the perception of the product has changed for customers. A shift from perceiving the mobile phone as a business tool to a leisure and recreation aid with considerable associated product and process innovations.

Paradigm: A traditional belief-system, the old paradigm ⬚ replaced by a new way of understanding, the new paradigm. Innovation in paradigm appears orthogonal to the other types of innovation: a dimension that cuts through the other types, that is always appears to involve innovations also in the other categories. Inner-directed paradigms as changes in organizational mindsets. Outer-directed paradigms as changes in business models. Music streaming as a paradigmatic change.

Social: Storsul and Krumsvik add an S to Francis and Bessant's four Ps. Social innovations as innovations that meet social needs and improve people's lives. A bit fuzzy explained in Storsul and Krumsvik as above innovations clearly also meet social needs and improves people's lives. Commend students who manage to pull out key points from Bhroin's chapter in Storsul and Krumsvik and point to how social media are used by minority language users for bottom-up innovation practices for addressing the challenge of protecting and promoting these languages.

Second dimension:
Radical innovations: clearly depart from existing practices. Represent revolutionary and risky changes in technology. Hitherto non-existent offerings.

Incremental innovations: technological improvements and adjustments. Extensions to existing process, goods or services. Most media innovations (like other types of innovations) are incremental.

Storsul and Krumsvik argue that Christensen's notion of disruptive innovation is a "particular type of radical innovation". I don't think Christensen would agree, and students should be commended if they manage to problematize this. Christensen is not on the syllabus, but his account was briefly mentioned in the first lecture. Innovations based on sustaining technologies improve the performance of established

products/services. Innovations based on disruptive technologies are first underperformers compared to mainstream products (i.e. they are not by necessity radical), yet they tend to be cheaper, smaller and more convenient to use. Eventually, as the underlying technology matures, disruptive innovations intersect with needs among the majority of consumers, and ultimately displace the mainstream products. Examples of disruptive innovations: digital photography, hand-held appliances, distance education, Netflix.

Question 3:
What are the important differences in the strategies of Quartz, Buzzfeed, and New York Times?

Buzzfeed is new startup, and a data-centric company, using user data to maximize both the themes they write about and the way it is written. Its goal is to write stories that will share, and it is thus tailor made for modern social media. It began with hit lists and cat videos, and has moved into serious journalism. Plus for recognizing this as a disruptor move. Buzzfeed uses its expertise in creating "viral" content to help advertisers, and get paid double for their ads than competitors do.

Quartz is an innovation part of a legacy organization: Atlantic set up a new, separate organization with no ties to the original, except for funding. Quartz is internet-only, with little focus on the homepage, and relatively more on their newsletter. Stories are either very short or long-form, avoiding the "valley of death". It was designed with a very specific target group in mind: 'influentials' in the business world, or "SYBAWS: Smart, young, and bored at work". It is advertising funded, but tries to be picky as to which ads it will run. Plus for recognizing this as a known strategy ("allowing groups of people within the organization sufficient freedom") from Fagerberg (and Van deVen)

New York Times is a legacy player that needs to cater to their paper subscription base, which is their main source of income. It has launched a suite of new sites and sub-sites, some successful and some not. It has put up a paywall, which has generated income. It struggles to change a very long and proud culture of print journalism. Plus for recognizing this as "inertia" or "path dependency" from Fagerberg.