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RIPE@ – FIFTEEN YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND 'LESSONS' LEARNED

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RIPE is an international network of scholars and practitioners who are committed to the development of public service in media. The acronym stands for Re-Visionary Interpretations of the Public Enterprise in media. As with most developmental initiatives it was conceived as an instrumental solution to a set of practical problems.

The project launched in 1999 when the need to update understandings about the public service approach and its future potential became urgent after the Protocol on Public Service Broadcasting was amended to the European Union Treaty of Amsterdam. This was aligned, as well, with the need to handle the most significant reorganizational and restructuring project in public service broadcasting since its inception – making the transition to public service media. Thus, there was both a need for scholarly contributions to public service theory and a managerial need for developing operations and organizations to better position the public sector in the rapidly evolving new ecology of media systems.

RIPE started with the idea of providing an online platform for informed discourse about PSM. That launched in 1999 and went nowhere very fast. Although everyone agreed it was a grand idea in principle, and many of the best known PSM scholars and strategy managers of the period agreed to participate, in fact such participation offered little career benefit. It was a good idea in theory, but the time that was required could be better spent publishing citable articles and working with strategy consultants (depending on which community we are looking at).

As the founder of this initiative, which was funded for the initial period by the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation, YLE, I struggled over this failure. I presented a paper at the 2001 conference of the Broadcast Education Association – BEA. It was titled: "RIPE or RIP? Re-visionary interpretations of a failed online discourse." About a dozen of the colleagues who attended that session had been among the volunteers who had agreed to contribute as participants in the online discourse project. There was a lot of heavy sighing and some mild hand-wringing. But after the initial shock ended the group agreed that the need was too great, the stakes too high, and the potential too important to let it all collapse. Thus, it was agreed that we try again but with a different approach – one keyed to ensuring that both communities would receive practical benefits that would be personally valuable according to the varied criteria for advancement in each profession. During the 2002 conference in Barcelona a separate group, involving some of the same people but also others from across Europe, we agreed to organize a RIPE conference.

The first conference took place in Helsinki, Finland in January 2002. The nuts and bolts of the RIPE model were hammered out in preparation for that event, and then continually developed in subsequent biennial conferences. The second conference was readily agreed for Denmark. During the Helsinki conference DR's Director General at that time, Christian S. Nissen, presented ideas about the PSB in the emerging media ecology, essential the shift to PSM, that were just taking shape at the time. This was supported by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). YLE's Director General, Arne Wessberg, was the first and a crucial support for the RIPE initiative, providing the funding to experiment and for the conference development. He and Mr. Nissen were close colleagues. The University of Tampere was the academic host for 2002. Close connections with the University of Aarhus in Denmark made that institution a natural fit for the 2004 conference.

The results of the 2002 conference were satisfying and stirred discussion about what to do with the proceedings. The academic representative for 2002 was Prof. Taisto Hujanen of Tampere. The next academic representative for 2004 was Prof. Per Jauert. Both were committed supporters of the Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research – NORDICOM – headquartered at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Together we agreed to propose publishing an edited book, and not simply as a collection of conference papers but a thoroughly developed and peer reviewed collection of the best of those papers. The conference theme and the book title were the same: "Broadcasting & Convergence: New Articulations of the Public Service Remit". Ulla Carlsson was the Director of NORDICOM and she liked the idea. It was a timely topic of great relevance in the Nordic region and beyond, and the contributors would include Nordic scholars. The book was published in 2003. It sold out.

This is the gist of how the RIPE initiative started nearly 15 years ago in the successful iteration, or actually closer to 17 years if one includes the initial failure. In this essay I provide an overview of these fifteen years of experimentation and developmental practice in building a collaborative platform for linking academics and practitioners in efforts to develop public service media. We begin with a brief overview of how the RIPE model works, and then focus on a few important observations. Whether they can be fairly construed as 'lessons' is for the reader to decide. This essay is a brief treatment. The author intends to develop a fuller treatment with a cohesive theoretical foundation in the near future.

THE PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED

After immigrating to Finland in 1998 as an American academic with a background in radio broadcasting, I was employed as Senior Advisor for Corporate Strategy and Development at YLE. At that time YLE had a divisional structure and there was great need for strategic and practical development inside YLE Radio. Mr. Tapio Siikala was the Director of Radio and he sponsored a range of projects that were important in making the transition to digital production systems.

In 2000 the Director General, Mr. Wessberg, was elected President of the European Broadcasting Union. He was already concerned about a lack of sufficient awareness of emerging issues and new ideas among members of the YLE Executive Board, and found much the same problem inside the EBU in those days. He believed there was too little critical analysis and developmental discourse at YLE and in the EBU in that period. Mr. Siikala recommended he talk with the author to see if a practical solution could be found.

As mentioned, the original idea was to launch an online discourse and that didn't work well at all. In the developed iteration, however, the author proposed a moderate investment to establish an international initiative for connecting academic researchers with professional practitioners, mostly strategic managers, to produce a conference focused on connecting the two communities. To be successful as a collaborative project this interaction would need to fulfill five criteria:

1. Each community must gain professional value from participation. It must be personally and organizationally beneficial for each side according to criteria that determine career success in each.
2. The distinctive needs of each community must be respected. Working together can't mean neglecting or marginalizing the different needs of each partner.
3. Each partner must contribute resources of agreed approximate value to ensure that both sides are fully engaged and co-responsible for success.
4. A model would have to be created to guarantee useful results for both sides and to ensure sustainability. But with enough flexibility to accommodate different legal requirements, norms and preferences in diverse settings.
5. The practice must be cost-effective with low overhead and no long-term investment requirements for any university conference host or PSB institutional sponsor.

The proposal was highly practical in character and was conceived as a workman-like way to help solve a concrete set of problems. The author had a robust international network already at that time, and importantly spanning both communities – i.e. as an academic and as a management consultant in the public sector. Working with colleagues in the Nordic region, the UK, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States, an informal group developed the RIPE model and did this largely without grants. The home institutions provided the support needed to attend conferences and the planning meetings necessary to prepare for them. Looking back, it is astonishing to observe how much voluntary effort was committed over the years and how strong the institutional support that made RIPE practicable. This institutional support was a key success factor, and another was the sincere and abiding commitment of colleagues that comprised the seeds of today's quite global RIPE network.

THE RIPE MODEL, IN BRIEF

The RIPE model features a biennial conference that is partly academic and partly practitioner seminar, which is followed up by an edited volume in a book series that called RIPE Readers[2]. A few features illustrate how the five criteria earlier stipulated were operationalized.

>Each conference has a public media organization that is the sponsor and a university that is the host. Representatives from both are part of the Conference Planning Group (CPG).

>The senior management team of the media organization decides the focus of the conference in return for being the primary source of external funding. The rest of the

[2] The entire series through 2013 is now available to download for free as PDF files at the NORDICOM website.

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money is provided by the participants' registration fees, usually with some grant money from domestic agencies that support scholarly social science projects.

>The first day of the conference is held at a venue owned by the public media firm to showcase accomplishments, involve political and industry figures that are important for the corporation, and to establish the importance of the theme as senior managers understand this in strategic terms.

>The second day is about delivering papers at a university venue. Papers are assigned to work groups on the basis of what each is about in relation to thematic topics, such as audience studies and media policy. Authors are participants and stay with the group all day rather than float between sessions and groups. The reason is because they not only expected to present their individual papers, but to engage in critical debate and to work collaboratively to develop answers to two steering questions that are linked to the theme for each conference. One of these questions is focused on developing theory and the other on implications for practice.

>On Day 3 the entire community works to reach conclusions that are discussed, debated and deliberated in a closing plenary session that is moderated.

>The RIPE Reader that follows is based on the conference theme as well as the discourse, and is influenced by these conclusions. The best 12 to 15 papers are selected with an eye on creating a rich cross-section of dimensions and cases as a unified thematic volume. The chapters are subjected to peer-review and the process is done according to the standards of credible journals in the social sciences.

There is a lot more that could be explained but this is enough to understand how RIPE works and what makes it comparatively unique. The RIPE model is designed to satisfy the five criteria.

This overview grounds a few important observations about collaboration between academics and practitioners.

COLLABORATION IS HARD WORK

Collaboration is a popular buzzword these days – it is a warm and fizzy tonic that disguises some stiff medicine. Collaboration can be wonderful, but it is rarely easy. Sometimes it comes naturally, but very often teamwork is as much about working on the team as the team doing the work.

One reason is that many academics are uncomfortable with the degree of dependency that collaboration requires. Many seem reluctant to risk specifying the practical implications of their work. Worrisome questions arise. What if I am wrong? What if managers try this and it fails, or worse yet if what I propose does damage?

When answers are provided these are usually hedged with uncertainty. 'Some of this might have some validity for some managers in some companies under some conditions sometimes'. Authors publish in academic journals and are mainly writing for each other. We aren't writing for practitioners; we're writing about them. Our language is highly specialized, and for professional reasons we are compelled to do things in particular ways according to academic norms and standards.

Collaboration is difficult for practitioners, as well. Managers say academic partners are often unfamiliar with contemporary technologies and are too often focused on yesterday's issues. They must educate the academic partners before anything useful can happen. Most managers are not as highly educated and some are intimidated by the 'intellectuals'. Many are afraid of looking foolish. Very often they will either keep silent or act out. And most managers are jealous about the data that is collected, or even can be, and resist any possibility that what might be said or written about them or their organization would be less than admiring in tone and supportive in complexion.

Scholars and managers work on the same subjects, but the objectives are different. They share interests in the same phenomena, but the stakes are not the same. They care about outcomes that are mutually significant, but for different reasons. Therein lies one key challenge in collaborating – how to get fair value for both partners?

STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS CREATE ENORMOUS COMPLICATIONS

Structural problems make collaboration complicated. For an academic, something is valuable if it can be published in a journal and others cite it; at best, if one also earns royalties, collects honoraria and finds it easier to secure research funding. For managers, it is valuable if they find it useful for solving problems, for recognizing and seizing opportunities, and for defusing threats; at best, if it facilitates wielding more influence or having a better or more secure position on the corporate ladder.

Most managers don't have time for deep contemplation about history or the long-term future. They are consumed with a constantly evolving set of immediate problems. They lack both the interest and time required for reading long reports, deciphering complicated arguments or figuring out how to apply abstract ideas.

For their part, it contributes little to career advancement for academics to discuss their work with practitioners, or to publish reader-friendly and practice-oriented versions. Even publishing in edited volumes isn't highly esteemed in many university systems today, despite the fact that books are far more widely read than nearly all journal articles. Most published articles are only read by a handful of scholars (ten at most), and almost none by a manager or other professional. Better than 80 % of all academic articles are never cited by anyone (Biswas and Kirchherr, 2015). Writing for magazines and blogs that can popularize the ideas is often desired by funding agencies, but the academy does not usually respect or reward the effort. Sometimes such activities are ridiculed as 'selling out' or frowned upon as a 'poor prioritization'. This system is broken, and yet it persists. It's a legacy system every bit as out of touch and out of date as public service broadcasting in the monopoly era.

Thus, managers often prefer to hire a consultant firm for a project rather than work with academic researchers. Consultants begin immediately and dedicate all the resources necessary to handle the project as a priority. Academics usually cannot do that because we are expected to also teach courses, advise students, handle an increasing assortment of administrative tasks, participate in committees, write grant applications, and act as reviewers for articles others hope to publish. So while a consultant can provide an answer within a few weeks, an academic requires months. And if the consultant is late the fee gets docked.

NOTHING MUCH WILL HAPPEN UNLESS A LOT IS DONE BEFOREHAND

A final observation is that nothing much can happen unless a lot is done beforehand. Big ideas are lots of fun; big results are lots of work. Tools, procedures, protocols, and routines are essential success factors and must be designed to ensure meeting the objectives. If the project is not planned from the start to accommodate the respective professional needs and interests of each community, it will likely fail for at least one of them. But doing this work is not easily published or immediately rewarding. There are big up-front costs before take-off happens. There will also be failures in project processes and results because innovation is inherently a risky business. Thus, methods and procedures for learning lessons from the failures or mistakes are imperative, and adaptation with flexibility is essential. And few journals, perhaps none, are interested in publishing about projects that failed.

PARTICIPATION IS ALWAYS UNEVEN

In the RIPE experience, academic involvement has been easier to maintain than practitioner involvement. With a few exceptions, practitioner involvement is sporadic and rarely extends beyond the conference each firm sponsors. The value these organizations and their managers receive is largely during the event, and mainly during the first day at that. RIPE has no funds to sponsor research even about the longer-term impact and results of the initiative. Anecdotal evidence suggests the series of RIPE Readers are fairly widely read by strategic managers and intellectual workers inside PSM organizations in many countries, and some have told stories about how chapters or particular volumes have been found useful by policy makers and by these organizations in working with government ministries and the like. But we really don't know how wide, how deep or how essential the impact has been. We can only say that in recent years there has been no problem at all in 'selling' a next conference event and that external independent sponsors have also gotten involved. This was most evident during the RIPE@2014 conference in Tokyo when the Open Society Foundations provided funding to bring early career scholars from the Global South to the conference. The EBU recently committed funding to support the growth of an online network that is affiliated with RIPE, as well.

But it is clear that on the whole academic participation has been far more cumulative and intensive than practitioner participation. Quite a few members of the RIPE network have remained active for years, a few even from the beginning. Many volunteer to review proposals, chair work groups and serve as moderators. They forward the Calls and stay engaged. The book series is often cited. The higher success among academics could be an effect of the orientation that governs the initiative, or it could mean that each community is engaged to the degree this is useful. We close with two pertinent observations, then.

First, one needs to be careful about normative assumptions and prescriptions. We do not know how big the success or how long-term the prognosis. And we do not yet know why the initiative has been more successful for academic network members than for those in the management community. We need to know, but until we do it is important to be reserved about the causes and reasons.

Second, RIPE needs further development – and that will never end or ever change. If there is ever a point or moment or stage when a developmental orientation stops, or when the community overall is no longer concerned about improving both the initiative and its performance, then it will no longer be worth funding. But so far, at least, this initiative is the most establish, most international and most successful of its type in the sector. And much of what is needed now and next will require funding that goes beyond conference sponsorship. That is a great challenge and it, too, can only be solved by persistence, commitment and – especially – collaboration.

Reference

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