

'World RIPE' Meeting in London

RIPE@2010 post-conference meeting

Saturday, 11 September from 13.30 – 15.00 at the University of Westminster

Gregory Ferrell Lowe, Chair

A meeting was organized after lunch on the third day of the RIPE conference. About 40 colleagues attended. Others who could not attend asked to be informed about the results. The agenda focused on further development of the RIPE initiative to address the only consistent criticism: its Eurocentric character.

Lowe briefly reviewed the history of the initiative to explain why it has been Eurocentric, distilled as three attributes characterizing parameters in the early years (2000 – 2005 or so):

1. The initiative began where there was financial and organizational support for doing this. Lowe was working for YLE in the early 2000s as Senior Advisor for Strategy and Corporate Development. He came to the job with a background as an academician in the USA. The executive management board of YLE was keen to have some process for receiving new input and ideas that could benefit strategy formulation and operational improvements. This was also attractive for the CEO, Arne Wessberg, who was at the same time the President of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). There was some pre-history that Lowe largely skipped because it is not really relevant to the current iteration of the project.
2. Scholars with the greatest early interest in the initiative were mainly working in northern Europe where PSB has been very strong historically, but also where it was even then stressed by varied challenges, internally as well as externally. The first and second conferences were held in the Nordic region (Finland in 2002 and Denmark in 2004) because the Directors General of the two PSB providers (Arne Wessberg for YLE and Christian Nissen for DR) recognized the potential value of the initiative and were willing to support this with capital investment as well as onsite hosting. Nissen was also involved with the EBU as the Chair of the Digital Strategy Group. No region or group was excluded from the call for proposals for either of the first two conferences, but few proposals were received from outside Europe and North America. Interest in RIPE has been developing in the wider world in recent years, and the organizers have been working to widen involvement and participation.
3. Until recently there weren't obvious opportunities to organize conferences about PSB outside of Europe. PSB has only really been clearly prioritized in Europe's dual broadcasting system, and variably practiced in countries with roots in Europe historically. Both limitations have lessened in the last several years, to such an extent that the 2010 conference enjoyed the most international representation to date. Moreover, it was agreed in the run-up to the 2010 conference that the next conference, RIPE@2012, will be hosted by the University of Sydney and sponsored by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). So there is opportunity for development of the initiative beyond its historic purview. Those who have been involved since the beginning support of wider involvements and a more global footing, and have always been in favor of

that. At the same time, as Greg concluded in ending this overview, it is important to understand that RIPE has roots in the European PSB context and there is no interest to abandon that, or even to weaken it. So the question is how to develop the initiative into a more broadly international project without losing the grounding and 'heritage' it has thus far established?

Minna Aslama made opening remarks via Skype. She is working at Fordham University in New York City and was involved in discussions about developing 'World RIPE' in the run-up to the 2008 conference in Mainz, Germany. She brief the meeting on her ideas about this because Minna has been a close working partner in discussion about this topic.

- The basic principles must be agreed upon. It's a good idea to develop the initiative beyond its historic roots, but there is also risk in that. To ensure success there must be clear objectives and agreed parameters. We would need to decide not only where conferences are possible but would actually be useful, and then how to produce them in parts of the world where resources will typically be much less and hosting could be far more complicated.
- Why would we like something related to RIPE to be a more global initiative? The importance of this for European broadcasting has been clear from the beginning. It was not clearly as important for other parts of the world until recently, or at least it is fair to say that its importance was not recognized by the wider world as something their societies would want to develop. Now we see growing interest in developing a sector of the media system to serve civil society in many countries that have lacked that historically, especially evident in Asia and Africa and, of course, some countries in Eastern Europe. Interest is now strong enough to legitimate the effort required for next stage development. Of course it is an open question as to what kind of public interest media should be developed in each context. It might not be PSB as we understand that. In fact, it probably won't be. But that is rather exciting to think about.
- A key question is who is willing to commit concretely? It is easy to support this in principle. Many have had interest in supporting democratic and economic development in the wider world for years. When the topic is discussed there is always a lot of enthusiasm and fine speeches. But the reality of producing this kind of conference requires a lot of hard work, some real investment in travel costs and so forth, constantly dealing with complications and unexpected problems, finding solutions and reaching compromises, pushing through to make it happen. So we would need colleagues who are ready to work at this, not only support it as an idea or in principle and during discussions. For example, to do this in many countries would certainly require revenue from outside the host institutions. We would need people who can apply for

funding from NGOs or international support agencies. We'll need people who can speak languages none of the originators of the RIPE initiative speak, and colleagues who know how universities and governments work in potential host countries.

- Of course we need to start small. It would not be wise to start off with grandiose ideas. It would be enough to identify one good possibility in Asia or Africa and work together to make a conference happen there, even if it would be smaller than the usual RIPE conferences and even with a different model. Her idea is to use participatory approaches. Perhaps we could have a website or a working presence in some already existing site where all of this could be coordinated and discussed and developed over a few years to result in something specific in 2014, for example. At any rate, non-institutional practices are just as important for something like this as the more traditional ways of working things out in the framework of institutions.

1. Given growing interest in developing public service media in countries beyond Europe and the richer countries of the West, would a more global initiative like RIPE be useful to launch? This discussion should be about why it would be important and how it could make a difference. This is important for devising an appropriate mission and objectives.

Hannu Nieminen: He questioned whether PSB has a "global" meaning. Certainly RIPE its self is semi-global, but he's not convinced the concept of PSB travels well even inside all of Europe, much less around the globe. There is community media, non-commercial media, and social media, all of which have dimensions of public service – but probably travel better. So which concept or concepts are we really thinking about in growing the initiative beyond Europe?

Barbara Thomass:She thinks the PSB concept does travel to areas beyond Europe. She has been working with young journalists from Africa and Asia and they find this important. She also noted the wider participation in this year's RIPE conference.

Peter Goodwin: In his experience it is mainly academicians talking with PS broadcasters in European institutions. This is not something that enjoys wider discussion. Also there are sponsorship agreements in the RIPE initiative. Both of these aspects spell potential trouble if we start to think about extending the thing. His example was producing a RIPE conference in China, conceivably involving CCTV as the host. If we are really talking about PSB that can't work because CCTV is state TV, whatever it claims to be. If we want geographic extension, then it's vital to explore the practical implications of doing a conference in those places.

Greg Lowe: It's obvious we aren't talking about a global thing yet, if ever. We've called it World RIPE for want of a better description, and described it as 'more global' – not as literally global. He said maybe we could think of the possibilities in terms of 'tiers' of development – which suggests there are countries beyond Europe that would welcome this sort of initiative and would be ready and able to do something with it, even if not the same thing as we do here and maybe not as RIPE per se. He said it was already specified in the agenda for the meeting that we are not proposing the RIPE model per se. Something more appropriate to conditions would be needed in other places. And there are certainly some countries that simply aren't ready. He said one can't conceive any such conference in Myanmar or Congo, for example.

Jo Bardoel: There is a normative dimension to this discussion, and indeed to the RIPE initiative. Some of the comments are about that, observing that what may be normative in northern Europe won't be elsewhere. Then there is discussion about practical requirements to secure some kind of conference in the wider world, and particularly about how it would have to be funded and organized. Regarding the normative dimension, there is in fact growing interest in countries outside of Europe for developing an independent public sphere in media. The European ideal is traveling, although of course not as discussed by John Reith. But the ideal is attractive. As for doing a conference to support this, the point we learned in doing RIPE is that the organizers create the model. So we would not be going somewhere to impose the way we do it. We would look to the local hosts and organizers to figure out the mechanics, but we would insist on certain principles. It's crucial to be clear about who the allies can be, and how the project can be done. But this can certainly be more global than it has been so far, and that was always the intention.

Inshon: She sees a policy fusion beginning in China, too. They have been studying PSB in Europe for some years now. The discourse that is happening in Europe is becoming more influential there. What is needed is a clear focus within RIPE for how to support such interests and development initiatives in countries like China. She wonders if a workgroup might be a useful thing to begin? The normative emphasis of this conference is very important not only for Europe, but perhaps more so for the world beyond Europe where democratic development and independent media are more desperately needed.

Kent Wilkinson: He thinks there would be possibilities to carve out spaces for discussion about these issues in various existing forums. He suggested the conference in 2012 could provide for one workgroup focused on PSB outside of Europe. Perhaps we could also have a session the morning of Day 2 about this, like we had this year with the Broadcasting in Smaller Countries project.

2. What is important for creating a realistic model that can be actually implemented? The RIPE initiative has a business model and a template for how conferences are organised, funded and planned, and for how proceedings are developed. It's unlikely everything in that model will work for the wider world where PSB companies aren't as strong, where economic conditions are much different, and where political and cultural structures vary a lot. So what needs to be considered and incorporated in order to make this work in practice?

Jessica Clark: She briefed participants about the Beyond Broadcasting conferences, of which there have been four so far. She thinks this could provide an interesting model in some respects, perhaps in combination with the way this is handled in the RIPE model – which is quite good, in her experience. At the least it seems useful to connect RIPE organizers with Beyond Broadcasting organizers because the interests are shared, and the voluntary nature of involvements are identical.

Barbara Thomass: The Global Media Development Forum could be worth looking at because they integrate activist organizations. This new RIPE idea is rather activist in her view and might be a good fit. She thinks it is important to link whatever is done next with existing initiatives. That ought to be a priority because it makes no sense to reinvent the wheel, while it makes good sense to benefit from synergies. Where are the win-win opportunities? Some research is needed about what to link with, and under what conditions. Some team should be created to do that.

Errol Salaman: AMARC might also be an opportunity for linking. This was begun by Marc Raboy some years ago, and has involved many people interested in developing community media. Errol has some involvement and could investigate.

Sylvia Harvey: The Carnegie Trust has been interested in “making good society” as a focused part of the projects they are funding. There is a media element in that worth looking at. She could help, if desired and when the time is appropriate. She also observed that there are networks for the users of public service broadcasters – civil society organizations that should be considered. She highlighted EURALVA.

Greg Lowe: The Soros Foundation has been very interested in the development of independent media in places where that's been iffy at best. He doesn't know how to go about getting in touch or securing funding, and also realizes that some people have a negative view of George Soros, but in his view it is worth exploring. One thing is for certain, nothing useful is possible without a pile of money to work with.

Jo Bardoel: There is a working group in IAMCR focused on policies in European PSB. The organizers recently decided to drop the European element because they have also seen growing interest to participate from around the world. There ought to be good options for connecting this World RIPE interest with this work group in the IAMCR context. He could help with that.

Dimakatso Collin Mashile: The International Telecommunications Society might be worth looking at. He wondered if it might be good to have some government board that runs the show, so to say, to provide a platform for sustainability. The rest of the group wasn't enthusiastic about this option, however. That doesn't mean it isn't worth investigating.

Michael Huntsberger: There are likely to be conflicts and complications when you begin putting together a more global initiative. It is certainly easier to work within a region and within some shared tradition, both of which have characterized the RIPE initiative to date – and must account to an important measure for its success. Michael therefore notes the importance of affinity. In his view we probably aren't talking about a 'world' RIPE, but rather a RIPE conference (or more than one over the years ahead) that happens in the wider world. It is most likely to be successful if this happens in a country that has some affinity with the European roots of the initiative. So, for example, it is easier to imagine a successful conference in South Africa, or if in China then not on the mainland but in Hong Kong.

Charles Brown: As EMMA President he noted that the public service focus is quite strong in that association. There are a lot of papers about PSB in each annual conference. There should be possibilities for building stronger links between RIPE and EMMA, and that might also open wider possibilities for some joint conference about PSB in the wider world.

Jeanette Steemers: She observed that going to Australia in 2012 is a significant move. Paul Chadwick told her and Greg that ABC is likely to be very active. Getting someone to speak from Papua-New Guinea or other countries in the South Pacific would not only be possible, but would be highly desired in their view. On a practical point, there is never enough time to do it all. So maybe there could be some kind of preconference on the Wednesday before Day 1.

Roberto Suarez: He sees a risk of segmenting the RIPE community. He likes the fact that we are a community and work together on selected topics with some shared focus. We should avoid organizing groups that don't interact with others. Kent said that is true. He also observed that a key question that keeps coming up is how to apply this model or some model to another part of the world. But he agrees it would be unwise to do anything that would fracture RIPE. The challenge is how to square that circle?

Sally Broughton Micova: We need to understand there will be groupings beyond regions or languages. She thinks a lot of thought is needed to identify shared interests despite differences.

Trisha Dunleavy: She noted that there is nothing broken in RIPE. It achieves what it sets out to accomplish, and in her view does so brilliantly. The mechanisms work and it's important not to mess it up. Whatever is developed next needs to be understood as related, but different. It can be done in association with RIPE, even alongside or within a scheduled RIPE conference as a

new component. But there are limitations that should be kept in mind. It would be foolish to lose what you've built in an effort to create something else.

Mary Milliken: She pointed out that the student discount was important for this conference. Pricing structures always matter. As she said, that will be even more important if this is done in a country with less resources or a region with great inequities.

3. Summary Points

- Organizational support is a key issue. Whether to have it or not, if so of what kind and in what ways, and with what caveats?
- Another issue is recognizing what we mean by 'global'.
- A third issue is elaborating a viable model, and over time perhaps an assortment of models, for funding and organizing where PSB is absent or poor (and where universities are poor, as well).
- A fourth is identifying the allies we can work with – and live with.
- Another is whether a new component could be added to RIPE, for example a special work group and a special session on Day 1. It is possible to build within what is already done. Could we find some funding to subsidize involvement from poorer countries? Pricing structures are important, as we have done with student discounts.
- Discussion about linking the initiative with other conferences and organizations was a central aspect. It was generally agreed that this ought to be core concept in the model that would be needed to make World RIPE happen in practice. Everyone agreed that research would be needed to identify and clarify the best options for connecting. There were also caveats about how far to go with this and what kinds of problems or complications to expect.
- We must ensure that RIPE is not divided, segmented or fractured. We don't want to lose what we have built. We don't want any 'ghettos' to develop.
- To what extent can technology substitute, or otherwise facilitate (which aren't the same thing)? Certainly the RIPE website could be some kind of platform to help. But there are limits to virtual interaction.
- We should look to invite people from some possible funding agencies to participate in the 2012 conference in Sydney, and do a pre-conference or post-conference that would involve them as well.

Jessica Clark and some of her colleagues applied for a pre-conference at ICA in Boston next year in May. It has been approved and we will organize a meeting for those that would like to attend – stay tuned.

The discussion made it very clear that it is important to piggyback what is done with this on the infrastructure of conferences. So we ought to devise a schedule based on the annual and bi-annual conference calendar to choose when those who are involved could meet easily and without additional expenses. Those meetings could be treated as milestones, meaning that some tasks would be done always in preparation and then become the focus of discussion in each successive meeting. This idea was strongly supported by Alan Stavitsky and Jessica Clark. Jessica thinks these meetings should be announced for the conferences to enable building wider connections. Al suggested the best way to proceed might be to connect with relevant interest groups that are already focused on related issues inside larger conferences, like the working group that Jo Bardoel mentioned for IAMCR. Michael volunteered to be an ambassador to the community radio conference. He'll see what he can do to build some links. He might be able to test-drive the piggyback idea.