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Author(s): Lowe, Gregory Ferrell
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THE RIPE INITIATIVE: INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE FOR

Media Management in Public Service Media

Gregory Ferrell Lowe

In a fascinating 2008 speech about the source of inspiration, writer Amy Tan said that each of her novels is motivated by a personal need to resolve some ambiguity and that success hinges on asking a good question to steer inquiry and sensitise perception: “When I have the question it is a focus and all these things that seem to be flotsam and jetsam in life actually go through that question...and become relevant” (Tan 2008). She concluded, however, that even so the best one can hope for is to capture “particles of truth” rather than something absolute. In her view this should not be a cause for disappointment, however, because without uncertainty “we can discover nothing new”.

This offers food for thought to a student of scientific method. First, it is important to recognise that creativity is an exercise of intellectual faculties striving for insightful solutions to practical problems. Second, the fruitfulness of inquiry is largely determined by the quality of question that frames the pursuit. And third, answers are always only partial and continuing uncertainties ought to be embraced rather than dreaded. As the Nobel physicist Albert Einstein famously observed: “To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.”

In science as in the arts, the stimulus for creativity is more pedestrian than is often recognised and practical problem-solving is the everyday stuff of marvellous potential for development.

The Creative Challenge

The Protocol on Public Service Broadcasting amended to the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam is of tremendous importance in securing the longer term viability of PSB in European media policy. It has also been catalytic in efforts to devise clearer definitions and increasingly explicit mandates for the enterprise (Lowe & Hujanen 2007), a trend also correlated with growing adherence to neoliberal normative principles legitimating certain economic arrangements and requirements for the public sector as a whole, especially as that impacts the organisation and orientation of PSB (Cuilenburg & McQuail 2003; Collins et al. 2001; McChesney 1999). This past decade has therefore been characterised by continuing success but also instability for PSB companies, the later especially evident in uncertain financial and popular support. This condition has been aggravated by the advance of digital media which escalates operational costs and grows organisational complexity (EBU 2007; Lowe 2008; *Can the Market Deliver?* 2005).

National governments increasingly require PSB operators to downsize, outsource and streamline – business vocabulary for cutting down and trimming back (Jakubowicz 2006; Coppens 2005). Thus, increasing pressure from policy makers at national and international levels (especially in the EU context), stiffening financial pressures, uneven public support, and media technology development have combined to create a kind of ‘perfect storm’ (Lowe & Bardoeel 2007). Inside executive board rooms at PSB firms it has been clear since the late 1990s, at least, that coping successfully requires renewing the ‘remit’ of public service broadcasting (Lowe & Hujanen 2003).

Throughout the period this author worked as a senior advisor to the executive board of the Finnish national broadcasting company, YLE, where renewal demands were of pointed interest. Coincidentally YLE’s Director General in the period, Mr. Arne Wessberg, was President of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the principle association of PSB companies. As a consequence, the interests of YLE in this national context were often correlated with the broader interests of PSB in the wider European context. The challenge to revise, renew and refine the remit required some mechanism as

a tool for securing fresh thinking to situate the historic remit for relevance to contemporary social, cultural, political and economic life.

The Dialogic Solution

RIPE is an acronym for Re-Visionary Interpretations of the Public Enterprise. This initiative was created in 2000 by a group of media researchers affiliated with universities in Europe and North America¹, chaired by the author, together with the executive management team at YLE.

Intellectual production was supported at YLE during the Wessberg era (1994–2005). An appreciation for the practical benefits that can be derived from collaboration with the academic community and emphasising critical thinking informed by original research explains the company's willingness in that era to invest in intellectual production. The RIPE initiative was envisioned as a dialogic solution. The idea was to create a forum in which two professional communities would collaborate on matters of shared interest while respecting the distinctive needs and character of each. These two communities are 1) media scholars and researchers in the academy and 2) strategic managers and their principle advisors in PSB companies. The challenge was to grown interaction at the intersection.

The intersection of the academic community and that of strategic management is laden with complications. The two communities speak different and specialised professional languages and have different priorities based on the practical requirements of their respective professions. The

1 The majority were professors from European universities in departments working in various areas of media studies. These professors include Taisto Hujanen from the University of Tampere in Finland, Per Jauert from the University of Aarhus in Denmark, Jo Bardoel from the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and Henrik Søndergaard from the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. The group also includes two professors from North America. John Jackson from Concordia University in Canada is a founding member from an even earlier iteration of the initiative in 1998 when the idea was to launch this as an online discourse. Alan G. Stavitsky from the University of Oregon in the USA has been involved from the beginning and in 2006 began developing a podcasting element.

interaction is also frequently complicated because 1) there aren't many people working at the same moment in both 'worlds', and especially with a focus on connecting them. 2) Because there aren't enough executive managers who recognise enough value in such collaboration to invest the time, money and considerable effort required for success. And 3) because this requires scholars willing to take the risks of putting their ideas on the 'firing line' in applied practice.

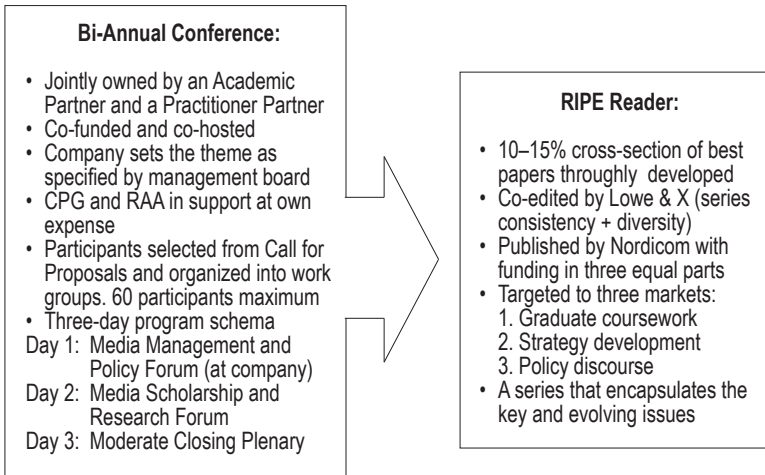
It was obvious that particular methods must be crafted to resolve such tensions in order to best guarantee success. The challenge in crafting this dialogic mechanism was manifold:

- 1) Design a process to fulfil the legitimate but distinctive needs of both communities...
- 2) That accommodates the respective interests of each community...
- 3) But highlights their practical mutual interests...
- 4) By guaranteeing professional value from participation...
- 5) Without incurring the costs and burdens of formal institutionalisation.

The dialogic solution is referred to as 'the RIPE model'. The model has two components: A) a bi-annual conference and B) a subsequent RIPE reader. Each conference brings together the two communities to discuss, debate and deliberate on a selected topical focus. In 2002 the focus was on new articulations of the PSB remit in the context of convergence. In 2004 the focus was on redefining the cultural mission of PSB in light of the complicated dynamics of multiculturalism and globalisation. In 2006 the focus was on implications related to cross-platform development with specific interest in content, broadly defined².

2 The archives of all RIPE conferences including 2008 are available online at <http://www.uta.fi/jour/ripe/> to find the link.

The RIPE Model



Some discussion is necessary about this model to give the reader an idea of the ingredients of the methods being elaborated here.

Collaboration begins with the funding and planning. Each conference is jointly owned by an academic partner, which is the sponsoring university department or departments, and a practitioner partner which has to date been a PSB company. Each conference is prepared by a Conference Planning Group (CPG) in which representatives from both partners participate.

Because the goal is to facilitate dialogue and deliberation, the model stipulates a small conference with a maximum of 60 scholarly papers. The first day is always hosted at the company and is focused on setting a strategic context and laying a discursive ground. The participants are divided into thematic work groups for the two days at the university where the emphasis is on scholarship. The authors of accepted papers present and discuss their ideas with participants that include practitioners and there is more time allocated for each author than is typical at academic conferences.

Moreover, the objectives for the method mean that it is not sufficient to simply present one's paper. RIPE conference participants are requested

to work together in thematic groups to answer two 'guiding questions' that ground summary results. One question is theoretical to serve scholarly interests and the other question addresses strategic implications of pressing concern for the executive management of PSB firms.

The production of the RIPE reader follows professional standards for academic scholarship. These books (three to date) are published by the Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research (NORDICOM) located at the University of Göteborg in Sweden. Each book is intended as a scholarly treatment in its own right, and thus the contents are not simply publications of conference papers but rather a carefully selected cross-section of the best papers in key strands of conference discourse which are rigorously revised for scholarly publication. The challenge for the scholars is not only to provide a valued scholarly result but to also address strategic and policy implications. Each reader must be useful for both collaborating communities. The series has been useful in policy making in recent years, especially in Finland and Iceland, and the contents have also been used by practitioners involved with management work as well as general research³.

3 It has not been possible at this date to empirically verify the use and impact of RIPE conferences and books. The evidence is thus far mainly anecdotal. The author knows for a fact, however, that the 2003 book was used by the Niemelä Committee in its work in updating Finnish media law. Prof. Broddason from the University of Iceland in Reykjavik has said that a similar parliamentary committee there was using the 2005 book. The author was asked to draft a report on the role of PSM in widening democratic participation in Europe by the Council of Europe in large part as an outcome of the RIPE project to date (cited in the references below as Lowe, 2007). It is also encouraging to see articles from the three readers being cited in journal and book publications in the field. Thus the informal evidence is rather strong, although empirical evidence is lacking and needed.

Three Points of General Importance

It is not possible to here delve more deeply or thoroughly into the detailed particulars of the RIPE initiative. The purpose of this treatment is to illustrate three points of general importance.

The first point is that creative solutions are premised on the development of familiar templates. Although many think that a creative result is totally new and completely unique, in practice that is an extremely rare occurrence. It is debatable whether it happens at all. The best solution is nearly always in adapting familiar tools, processes and practices to suit unique circumstances. For example, the RIPE method is premised on rewards as recognised in the culture of each professional community. Scholars favour participation in conferences and the publication of articles because these outcomes have formative impact on decisions about their professional advancement (e.g. 'publish or perish'). Strategic managers favour involvement in events that build networks and offer generous possibility to address issues of immediate decision-making importance. Theory is important only insofar as the notions and insights have practical value. This facilitates satisfaction of their personal needs for professional success. Thus there is always some context which determines both the utility and fruitfulness of any method and understanding the dynamics of that context is crucial for achieving the objectives a method is designed to accomplish.

The second point of general importance is that new knowledge is mainly secured by the interaction of diversity rather than familiarity. Although the best methodological solution will frequently be found in the adaptation of a familiar template, the *ingredients* that produce something substantively new as often depends on incorporating diversity. This is validated by a growing body of research in various areas of contemporary business scholarship, especially creative organisation and knowledge management studies (see for example, Chaudrey 2005; Goldsmith et al. 2004; McKenzie & van Winkelen 2004; Choo & Bontis 2002; von Krogh et al. 2000; Lampikoski & Emden 1996). Birds of a feather may indeed flock together, but they tend to hatch the same old eggs.

The third point of general importance is that practical methods benefit from the totality of one's training, experience and life practice. There is a

tendency to erect barriers between the personal and the professional, and often also between periods of professional identify and practice in one's comprehensive career. This is to be discouraged because it can only stymie many of the best possibilities for innovation. Potentially elegant solutions are often found in the confluence, conjunctions and discontinuities of personal and professional life as a whole. Of course the student of science must be cautious of dangers to validity posed by unguarded subjectivity. But *caution about* is not the same as *avoidance of*, as many gifted scientific thinkers have encouraged students to understand (see for example, Gibson 2006; Gould 1981; Kuhn 1962).

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