

# Preface

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# Preface

**Gregory Ferrell Lowe\***

**University of Tampere, Finland**

Public service broadcasting has a long history in some countries and is particularly significant in the UK and Scandinavia where PSB organisations have been active since the 1930s and continue to be foundational in broadcasting systems. This region is the historic 'heartland' of the public service approach. PSB came later to southern Europe (1970s) due to military dictatorships in Greece, Portugal and Spain, and later still to central Europe (1990s) due to authoritarian control during the Soviet era. PSB was instituted in Germany and Japan by the Allies after World War Two, a preference advocated by the United States – not only England and France. PSB launched in the later half of the 1960s in the USA as one accomplishment of President Lyndon B. Johnson's drive to build the American Great Society. Today, PSB is under increasing strain and heightened uncertainty in the West, but at the same time there is growing effort to develop public service provision in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This dynamic was an emergent theme in the RIPE@2011 Reader (Lowe & Steemers 2012) and is thematic in the RIPE@2015 Reader (Lowe & Yamamoto 2016).

I want to highlight three implications that link the reports in this collection on PSB in the Global South.

The first implication highlights the importance of public service broadcasting for the development of democracy. The Allies could have chosen the private commercial model as the framework for broadcasting in post-war Germany and Japan. They did not due to the higher priority of securing the development of democracy in both countries. The United States did not need PSB due to any lack of competition in radio and television, or any problem (at that time) with commercial profitability of media. The reasons hinged on democratic principles and priorities. Outside the West, interest to cultivate PSB among advocates, activists, and pro-democracy politicians and parties is squarely focused on developing democracy. PSB is under fierce attack in Europe today and it is especially worrisome to see an accelerating return to 'soft state' broadcasting in central Europe. Too many in Europe's 'developed' democracies have unfortunately forgotten or wilfully reject the continuing need for a non-state and non-profit media sector to support the democratic interests of civil society. The Amsterdam Protocol recognises this as the essential role and function of PSB. It requires vigorous defence today.

The second implication is a corollary to the first. The development and vitality of PSB cannot be taken for granted. PSB is orientated to resist the vested self-interests of political and commercial elites that rely on media as a tool for maintaining and exercising power. From the beginning, the public service ethos prioritised serving people as citizens first and foremost, and therefore on as fair and equal a basis as possible. This is evident in the principle of 'universalism' – i.e., the mission to ensure access of all content to all people without discrimination. Further, it is a core value of public service journalism that is premised on the 'arm's length' principle – i.e. news and current affairs content must not be unduly shaped by

or beholden to the interests of either the State or Industry. Contrary to the popular belief that media are not powerful today, and that there is such abundance that special provision is no longer necessary, media content clearly has a decisive role in shaping public opinions and facilitating discourse that comprises a public sphere. Those effects are not usually direct, but they are persistent and cumulative. Moreover, media channels and services that address people in their role as citizens of a collective public with shared interests in the conditions, directions and characteristics of a society as such, actually are not available in abundance. In many countries they are comparatively few and in decline (Lowe & Stavitsky forthcoming). This points to the ceaseless nature of socio-political struggle that is required to establish PSB where there is no heritage of this practice and approach, and to recreate where it is already established but in need of development. In all cases, the struggle is about preserving, protecting and defending principles that are foundational for PSB's social legitimacy.

The third and final implication highlights the importance of cultural context and conditions in determining appropriate policies, structures, and practices for PSB. The contributors in this report recognise the historic value of the 'European classical model' as a source of inspiration in contemporary efforts to establish a genuine public service practice in countries without this heritage. At the same time, it is highly unrealistic to suppose that the ways and means by which classical PSB has structured, financed, organised, managed and operationalised are viable elsewhere. In fact, PSB has been variously handled in the West, as well; to a degree that suggests there is no 'Western' model outside of abstract theory. In the United States, for example, funding is largely provided by individual donors and corporate underwriting, and the licence fee system for funding is in decline even in northwest Europe. Commercial advertising has been a characteristic revenue stream for PSB in southern and central Europe where a core challenge is successfully transitioning from institutions premised on a heritage of state broadcasting to public broadcasting for civil societies. That challenge is equally characteristic of struggle to establish PSB in much of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Thus, one needs to be self-critically careful about assumptions regarding the 'right way' to do public service broadcasting. In the West, received heritages, comparatively big and influential legacy institutions, and socio-political cultures that facilitate PSB in affluent countries with long-established democratic structures are not conducive for achieving what is needed in other countries with far less resources, more uncertain identities, fragile democratic institutions, uneven support for PSB, and popular suspicions that it's really only state broadcasting with better cosmetics.

The RIPE initiative unequivocally supports the development of public service in media of all types, in all places, and in every respect that is conducive for strengthening democracy and ensuring the wellbeing of citizens in healthy civil societies. Our network is thoroughly international and increasingly global. Speaking personally, I believe there will be as much and more the West can learn from efforts and experiences in developing PSB (or PSM) among the Rest, as the Rest has learned in drawing inspiration from the West. This report is one contribution to a shared struggle to secure a sector and practice in media provision that prioritises public service as the core mission and social responsibility as the principled foundation. The commercial media industry will always be able to take care of its own self-interests, and political actors control the levers they use in the daily exercise of power. Our mission is to support those who can't otherwise secure their legitimate self-interests in the

provision of media contents and services that are genuinely in the public's interests as citizens, both in the West and among the Rest.

As indicated in this report, there is no greater scope of challenges in this regard than the work that is essential to establishing PSB in the Global South.

Gregory Ferrell Lowe  
RIPE Continuity Director  
Professor of Media Management  
School of Communication, Media & Theatre  
University of Tampere, Finland

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Tampere, Finland

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\* Gregory Ferrell Lowe, School of Communication, Media & Theatre  
FI-33014 University of Tampere, Finland. Email: [greg.lowe@uta.fi](mailto:greg.lowe@uta.fi)

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A. Rahman & G. F. Lowe (Eds.), *Public Service Media Initiatives in the Global South*



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