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Author(s)	Pratt, Martin
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The Scholar-Practitioner Interface in Boundary Studies

Martin Pratt*

In this presentation I would like to share some of the issues and trends that we have experienced at the International Boundaries Research Unit (IBRU) at Durham University, particularly working with governments around the world. I would also like to highlight some of the situations that governments are facing today that are causing concerns and to discuss the ways in which border scholars can contribute to and support governments as they seek to resolve the problems and to assist borderland communities. Fundamentally, although borders can be abstracted and discussed from a theoretical context, they are still lines that run through real physical and human landscapes, and they impact significantly on the lives of millions of people around the world.

IBRU works to minimize conflict associated with international boundaries on land and at sea around the world. That is our simple mission statement. Our work is interdisciplinary in approach and global in scope – although it is fair to say that we have more expertise in some parts of the world than others. IBRU seeks to integrate theory and practice in order to provide practical expertise in boundary making, border management, and territorial dispute resolution, and also provide academic leadership in the study of boundaries and their impact on international relations and the development of borderland regions. Therefore, IBRU is situated at the interface between the theoretical, the scholarly and the practical.

IBRU was founded in January 1989 by Gerald Blake, a political geographer with a longstanding interest in territory, the law of the sea, and boundary-making. He was rather unnerved when just a few months after IBRU's establishment we saw the first use of the term "the borderless world" in a famous article by Kenichi Ohmae, and even more alarmed a few months later when the ultimate symbol of Cold War division, the Berlin Wall, fell. For a while it appeared that he may have created a white elephant – a research unit devoted to the study of boundaries at a time when the forces of globalization were creating new relationships, identities and patterns of movement that were rendering borders meaningless or, at least, largely redundant. This remains a powerful theme in business literature, and is often heard in political rhetoric, as well. My favourite summary of this view came from former U.S. President Bill Clinton, when he told an audience at Harvard University in 2001, "You live in an age of interdependence: borders don't count for much or stop much – good or bad – anymore." That is certainly a long way from Lord Curzon's famous claim in 1907 that, "Frontiers are indeed the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations." Curzon's view largely held true throughout the first half of the 20th century, and arguably throughout the Cold War as well. However, it is not a theory that many scholars

* Martin Pratt is the Director of Research at the International Boundaries Research Unit at Durham University, UK. Please note that this paper is the transcription of the author's oral presentation at the symposium "First Contact: Bringing Together the Worldwide Community of Border Studies" held at the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido Univeristy on December 19, 2009.

subscribe to today. The question is where do we sit between the globalized borderless world and the world in which borders are one of the cornerstones of international relations?

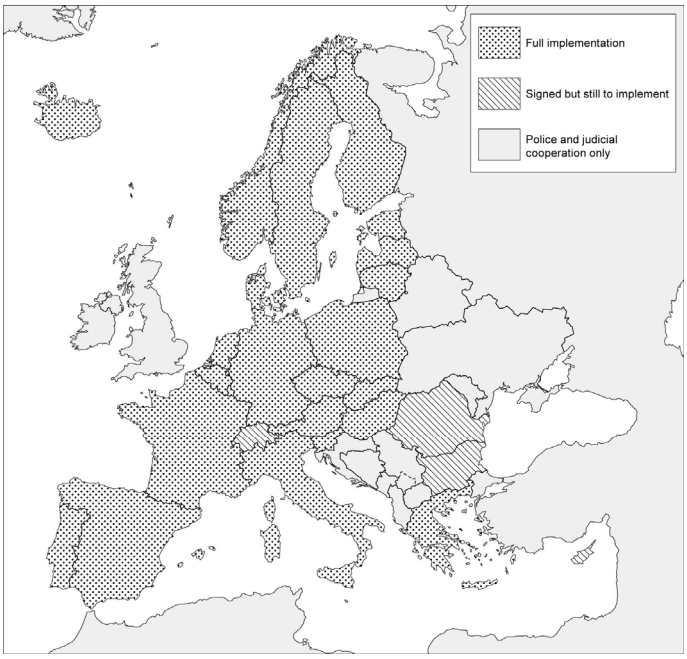

Fig.1 Schengenland map

In Europe – at least for the 24 states that have fully implemented the various agreements that are collectively known as the Schengen agreements – the removal of day-to-day border controls mean that for most people, most of the time, the borderless world perhaps is starting to become a reality. However, the only way in which "soft borders" can be achieved within Europe is by hardening the borders on the edge of Europe. Moreover, once we get outside Europe, we see a very different picture in many parts of the world. While globalization is clearly reducing the impact of boundaries on the movement of capital and ideas, and to a lesser (but still a significant) extent, on the movement of people and goods, territory remains one of the key building blocks of political power and legitimacy, and states still go to great lengths to secure and defend their territory. Control of territory remains important for countering external threats such as illegal immigration, cross-border crime and, especially since 2001, international terrorism. Control over territory also remains important for maximizing access to dwindling natural resources, which become ever more valuable as the global population continues to grow. Because territory remains so important, boundaries are almost always a potential source of friction between states, and governments need to develop strategies to minimise that friction. This is one of the areas in which border scholars can help.

There are numerous territorial disputes around the world. Some involve hugely complicated series of historical, geographical, cultural and economic issues, and have significant regional and even global implications. They also receive a lot of study from border scholars, and an enormous amount of policy-oriented attention. But for every Israel-Palestine conflict there are ten smaller, more obscure disputes. One example on which we have worked is a dispute between Guinea and Sierra Leone, where the two governments agree that there is a treaty defining a particular section of boundary, and they agree that the boundary follows the left bank of the Moa/Makona River. Their only disagreement is over exactly where that bank is located, and yet it has resulted in military occupation of one bank of the river, and a dispute between two states which, while it probably does not cause the world's diplomats to lose much sleep, still has the potential to cause significant hardship

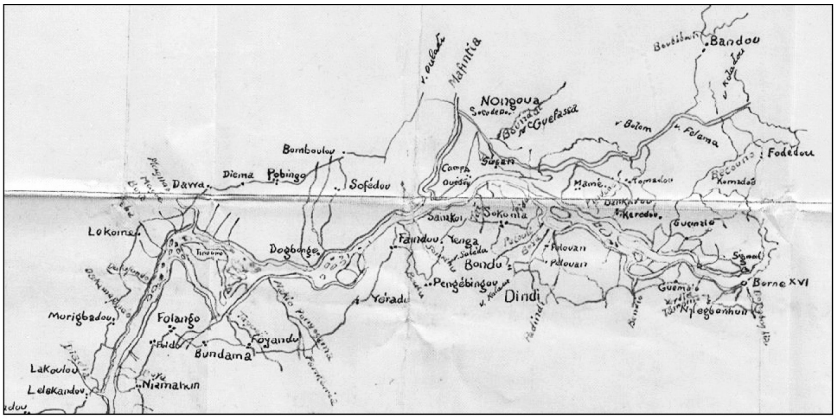

Fig.2 Guinea and Sierra Leone pictures

for poor borderland populations. Moreover, as we saw ten years ago with a similar situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, a minor incident along a contested boundary can very quickly escalate to a full-scale war. It does not take very much when territory is at stake and nationalistic fervour pours fuel on the fire of a disagreement over a seemingly insignificant strip of land. All border disputes need to be taken seriously.

Next, I would like to consider the concept of boundary-making. The term has been around for nearly 100 years – it was first used as the title of a book by Thomas Holdich in 1916 – but it was really given life by the American geographer Stephen B. Jones in his 1945 study *Boundary-Making: A Handbook for Statesmen, Treaty Editors and Boundary Commissioners*. During the Second World War, Jones was invited by the American government to prepare a practical handbook for governments anticipating a major reconfiguration of international territory at the end of the war, as there had been at the end of the First World War. Jones came up with a simple model of the boundary-making process: political allocation of territory following a conflict; the legal delimitation of a boundary in a treaty; the physical demarcation of that line on the ground; and the subsequent administration of that line. *Boundary-Making* is a classic piece of political, technical geography, and it remains the best practical guide to the creation of international boundaries anywhere. However, looking at boundaries from the perspective of today, Jones' model is somewhat limited, and at IBRU we have been working to develop the model. Firstly, allocation of territory is rather rare today, although it still occurs from time to time at the end of conflicts where two states agree on the principles for dividing contested territory before a line is agreed. More significantly, while Jones acknowledged the importance of administering boundaries, from his perspective administration involved little more than maintaining

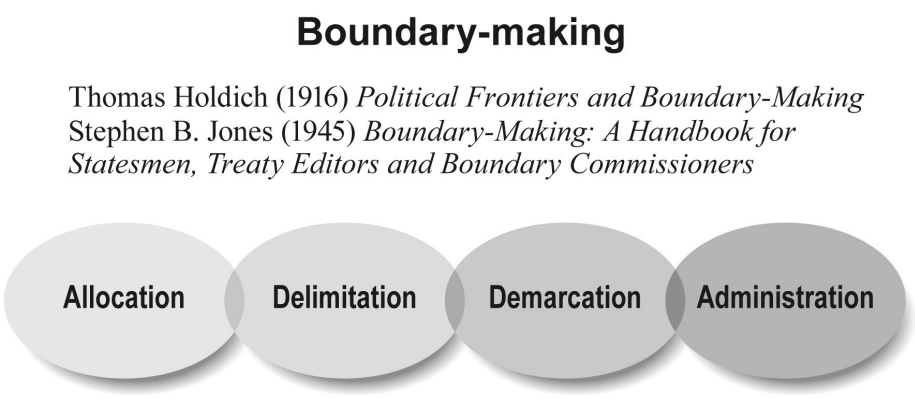

Fig.3 Boundary-making figure #1

the infrastructure of demarcation. He paid little attention to the range of practices involved in border management – and many governments do the same today. Too many diplomats and lawyers consider boundaries to be "finished" once they have been defined in a treaty and perhaps some form of demarcation has taken place. But delimitation and demarcation are really only the beginning of the boundary-making process: it is what you do with the boundary once it has been established that determines whether it is successful or not. Border management is a complex task and there is a growing discourse on the challenge of trying to balance the seemingly incompatible goals of maximising access for desirable goods, people and ideas, while at the same time maintaining security of the state, which governments around the world agree remains essential. There is also a plethora of management issues relating to natural resources, infrastructure in borderlands, and the protection of cross-border ecosystems. Any boundary-making strategy developed today needs to take such issues

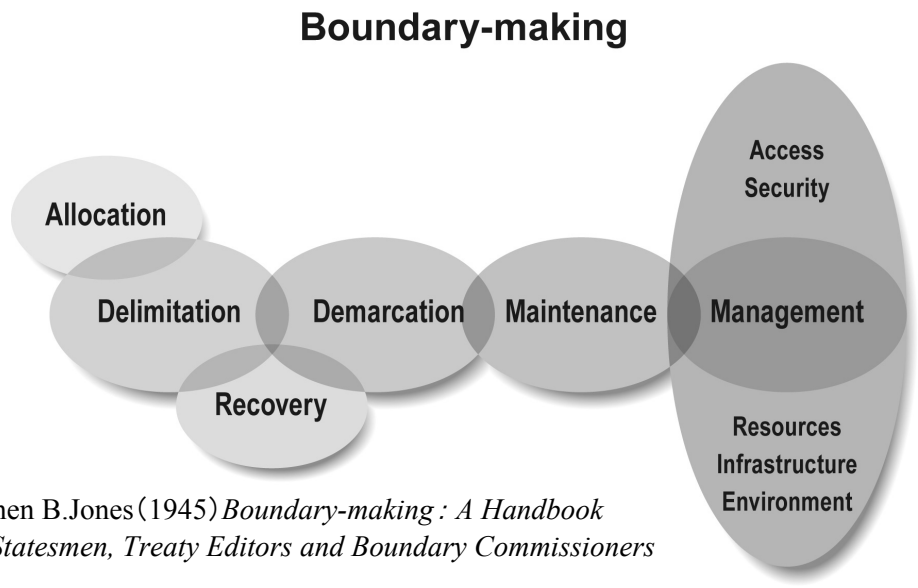

Fig.4 Boundary-making figure #2

into consideration.

Another very useful model when thinking about boundary-making is the model developed in the early 1990s by the historian of the Mexico-U.S. boundary, Oscar Martinez. Martinez identified four types of borderland, ranging from alienated borderlands, where there is usually some sort of physical barrier that is preventing interaction between neighbouring states, through co-existent borderlands, interdependent borderlands and finally integrated borderlands, which is where much of the European Union is now located. Moving from alienation to integration, borders are more open, there is greater interaction across the boundary and the breadth of the borderland expands. For many neighbouring states the ultimate goal of border management is to facilitate borderland integration. However, in some cases borderland integration may be politically or culturally impossible, and interdependence may be a more realistic goal.

Next, I would like to examine the process of determining where boundaries run when there is a dispute, and the role of geographers in this process. Many scholars are very good at fieldwork; many practitioners, surprisingly, are very poor at it. The judges of International Court of Justice, for example, have never visited the border in areas where they have been asked to define a boundary. I would argue that you cannot create an effective boundary unless you have first-hand knowledge and experience of the physical and human landscape through which the boundary runs. Work IBRU has been doing with the Palestinian Authority includes trying to establish where the lines of separation between Israeli and Jordanian-held territory in Jerusalem from 1949 to 1967 were actually located on the ground. While some evidence can still be found in the form of fragments of walls and rusty barbed-wire fencing, it is the historical memory of people who lived in the city during the Armistice period which has been most valuable in building up our understanding of the reality that will form the basis of negotiations on the status of Jerusalem and the rest of the Israel-Palestine boundary.

For Japan and for many other countries, maritime boundaries are also hugely important issues. Around the world there are more than 430 potential maritime boundaries, of which fewer than half have been even partially agreed. There are numerous overlapping claims and considerable scope for dispute. Coastal states are also currently going through a process of defining jurisdictional rights over areas of seabed more than 200 nautical miles from their coastal baselines. This is adding tens of millions of square kilometres of maritime space, which falls under coastal state jurisdiction. While these areas are not sovereign territory, they nevertheless have a significant impact on the way that the world's oceans are managed and perceived by states.

IBRU has recently done some work on maritime boundaries in the Arctic, where the world's media seem determined to paint a picture of future conflict – what is sometimes described as the "new Cold War." I disagree with this interpretation, as the coastal states are so far actually managing their disagreements over sovereignty and jurisdiction in the Arctic quite effectively, and I expect that overlapping claims in that region will be resolved peacefully. But there are, of course, many other areas where there is significant conflict over maritime boundaries, perhaps most famously the South China Sea, where there are numerous sovereignty disputes over small islands and multiple overlapping jurisdictional claims that are incredibly difficult to disentangle – with valuable fishing resources and possible oil riches at stake.

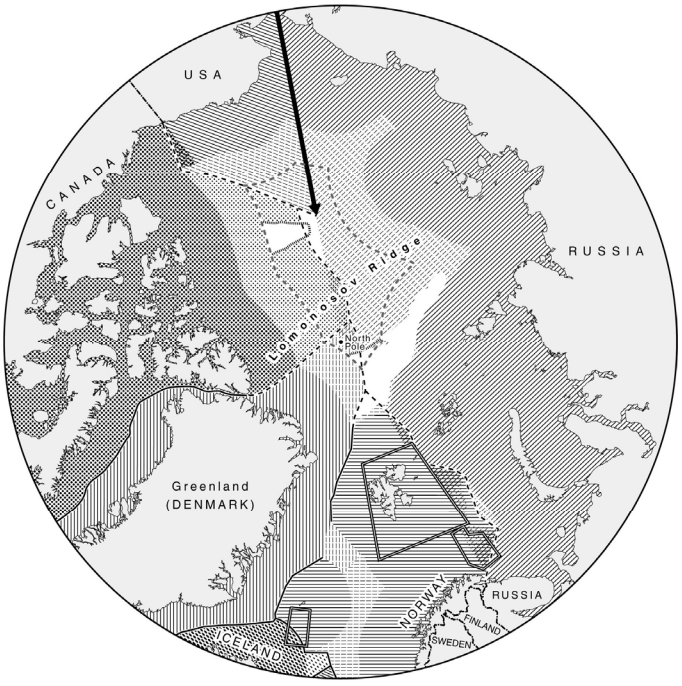

Fig.5 Arctic maritime jurisdiction

Island sovereignty disputes are also a common feature of the world political map. Some disputed islands, such as the Northern Territories, are substantial in size and have settled populations; such territories have obvious value to the states which claim them. But there are also twenty or so disputes over tiny islands which are uninhabited and possibly uninhabitable, for example the dispute between Japan and Korea over Takeshima/Dokdo. Such islands are sometimes disputed largely because they have symbolic value for the claimant states, but most also have considerable potential economic value – even tiny islands can generate sovereign rights over the resources of hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of the surrounding sea and seabed. However, in some cases there is controversy over whether very small islands actually generate continental shelf and exclusive economic zones rights at all: under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) "rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own" are only entitled to a territorial sea. China, for example, is unhappy with Japan's claim to exclusive economic zone and continental shelf rights around the tiny features of Torishima, and tried to raise the issue at the meeting of State Parties to UNCLOS in 2009. China's initiative did not receive much support but the island/rock debate is certain to continue and is likely to be a source of international friction for many years to come.

Then there is the issue of sea-level rise, which is going to impact on many countries, especially low-lying island states. The government of the Maldives, for example, recently held a cabinet meeting underwater to highlight the threat of the total disappearance of the Maldives islands. Other island states such as Tuvalu may not disappear, but they are nevertheless becoming uninhabitable: rising sea levels mean that salt water is contaminating the fresh water they have, and the people are forced to move away. This raises interesting legal questions: if the islands become uninhabitable, will they still generate rights over maritime space beyond the territorial sea?

Nor is it just maritime boundaries that are going to be affected by climate change. Large areas of the planet are going to be unable to support their existing populations, leading to increasing migration and competition for resources, especially water. As yet, there have not been any serious conflicts that could genuinely be said to be purely over water, but that does not mean there will never

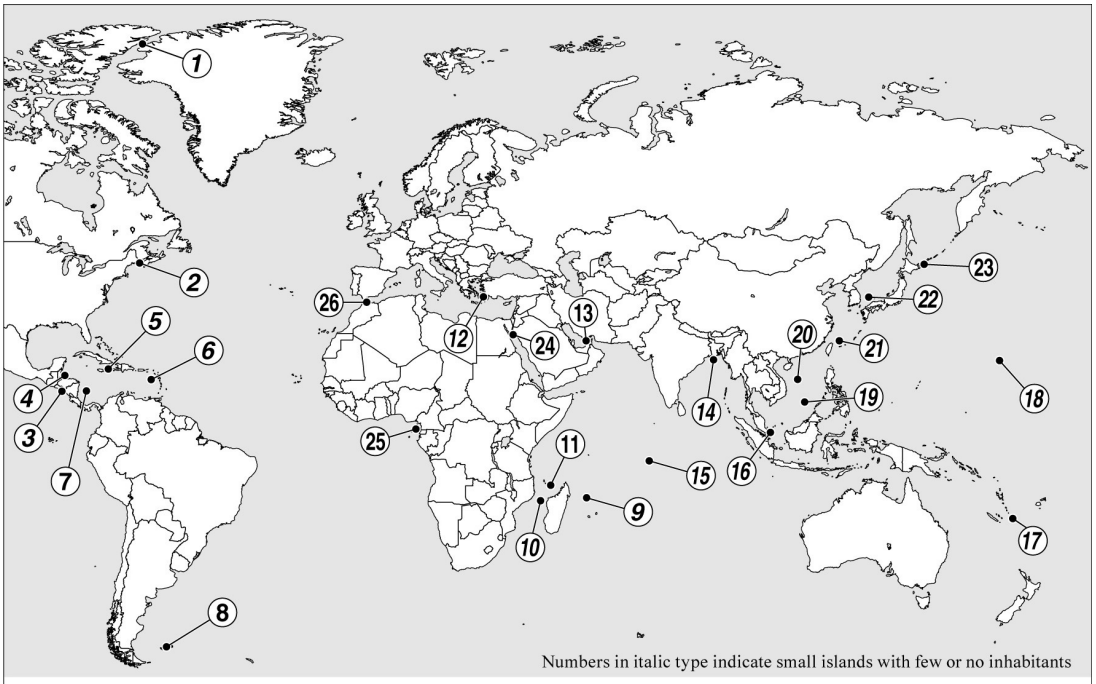

Fig.6 Island sovereignty disputes

be a "water war." Water security is a major cause for concern for many states, and certainly the United Nations continues to worry about the implications of competition over water in borderland areas.

River boundaries are also very significant. Nearly a third of the world's total land boundary length is riverine, and many international boundaries follow rivers for much of their course. This creates challenges for technicians in terms of the definition of boundaries, and for policymakers in terms of the management of a shared resource that is used for irrigation, fishing, transportation and sometimes energy generation. River boundaries are an understudied aspect of international boundaries, and I would encourage more scholars to take an interest in them and their policy implications.

Even when states manage to avoid conflict, many are likely to face large-scale immigration, and are going to need to develop new border management strategies to cope with this. Some will be tempted to construct fences and other physical barriers. Opinion is divided over how effective such

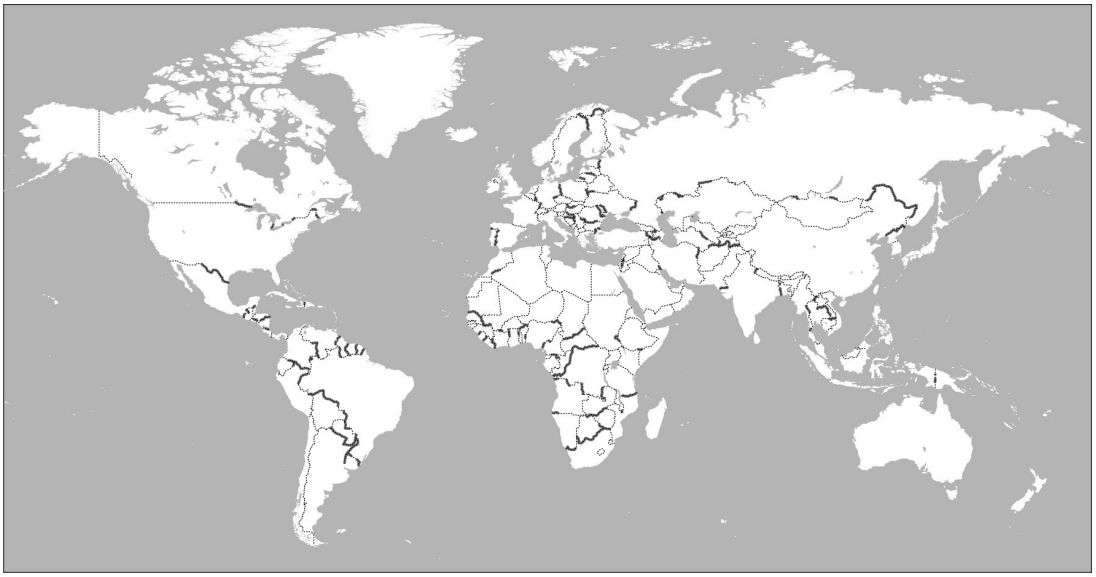

Fig.7 Major river boundaries around the world

measures really are in terms of thwarting determined migrants. However, two things are certain. Firstly, such initiatives are incredibly expensive. One U.S. congressional report estimated that the cost of building and maintaining 700 km of fence along the U.S.- Mexico boundary (i.e. only a third of the total length of that boundary) over 25 years could be as much as 49 billion US dollars. The second fact is that fences are massively obstructive to the development of borderland regions. Indeed, the most likely outcome of sealing a boundary with a fence is, to use Oscar Martinez' evocative term, an alienated borderland, in which the dynamism that has characterized borderlands for centuries is absolutely destroyed. Fences are the ultimate symbol of a dysfunctional borderland.

Fortunately, humans are quite good at resisting enforced alienation by states, but nevertheless we need to encourage creative thinking about how borders are perceived and managed, in order to maintain a healthy balance between access and security. This is also an area in which scholars have key roles to play.

Some of my colleagues in Durham are approaching issues of border management from a range of different perspectives. Although we are based in the geography department, five of the seven staff come from different disciplinary backgrounds. One of the things we are most proud of at IBRU is the conferences we have organised over the years. We have held twelve since 1989, and our 20th Anniversary Conference in April 2009 was attended by 200 participants from 50 countries around the world. The reason our conferences tend to be such a success is captured in the feedback we got from one of the participants from Switzerland, who highlighted the fact that it was not just the international mix or the disciplinary mix within the scholarly community that made the conference so exciting, but the interaction between scholars and practitioners. It is such interaction that will lead to the real success of the initiative at hand.