Abstract

Overseas broadcasting has been an integral part of the BBC’s remit since the creation of its Empire Service in 1932. Throughout its history, the BBC has consistently argued that its services for overseas listeners should not be classified as a form of British propaganda, but instead understood as a fundamentally benevolent undertaking, providing objective, impartial, and trustworthy news and information to hundreds of millions of listeners worldwide. In the post-imperial era, the World Service increasingly depicted itself as not just a ‘global public service broadcaster’, but also as a kind of humanitarian endeavour, an ‘Oxfam of the Mind’ which made a significant contribution to Britain’s wider efforts in the field of overseas development. This article critically evaluates this vision of the BBC World Service as a post-imperial ‘gift to the world’. It outlines how, in the early 1990s, the World Service created the first BBC-branded overseas development NGO, the Marshall Plan of the Mind (MPM), which used both UK government and external philanthropic funding to help promote British commercial and diplomatic interests in post-communist Eastern Europe. MPM is then contextualized in relation to the World Service’s longer (and largely overlooked) history of overseas development work and its relationship with the NGO sector, both before and after the end of the Cold War. By exploring how and why the World Service inserted itself into the NGO sphere, this work contributes to ongoing historical debates regarding the BBC’s relationship with the state and the role(s) that global development NGOs have played in shaping Britain’s post-imperial ‘place in the world’.

* Steve.westlake@bristol.ac.uk
On 17 October 1991, the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce (RSA) hosted a symposium at their London headquarters, entitled ‘Eastern Europe: New Challenges to Business’. The round-table brought together an illustrious panel of speakers to discuss how Western nations and corporations might support the region as the Cold War drew to a close. The panel was made up of four prominent speakers, including a leading director of the newly created European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Boris Ženić; the Chief Executive of British Petroleum, Robert Horton; and former US President Ronald Reagan.

In his remarks, Reagan unsurprisingly celebrated the recent fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, as well as the role that the capitalist democracies of the West (and, in a nod to his audience, Britain in particular) were already playing in providing economic support and political guidance to the region as it began its transition to democratic capitalism. With his typical rhetorical flair, he made the case for maintaining and intensifying that support, arguing that ‘our friends in the east’ had reached a ‘critical turning point’:

We have been there as they found their way out of darkness. We must be there now to lead them to a bright future. We must let the benefits of democratic capitalism flow like a steady river into these countries where the sun is just beginning to shine.2

Completing the quartet of invited speakers was a somewhat less obvious choice for a panel devoted to solving the ‘new challenges to business’ in Eastern Europe: John Tusa, Managing Director of the BBC World Service. Exactly what did the international broadcasting arm of the BBC have to contribute to a debate on Western support for Eastern European business?

In his speech, Tusa emphatically made the case that the World Service had a prominent and uniquely valuable role to play in ensuring that the ‘benefits of democratic capitalism’ proposed by Reagan did indeed ‘flow’ into Eastern Europe.3 For Tusa, playing this role was a matter of personal as well as professional conviction: born in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, in 1936, his family had emigrated to the UK when he was a young child.4 His

1 Ronald Reagan, et al., ‘Eastern Europe: New Challenges to Business’, RSA Journal, 140 (1991).
2 Reagan et al, ‘Eastern Europe’, 31.
3 The name ‘BBC World Service’ became the official name of the whole of the BBC’s overseas broadcasting operations in 1988. Between 1965 and 1988, the name ‘World Service’ was officially reserved for the BBC’s English language service for overseas audiences, as part of the wider ‘BBC External Services’, which also included its many foreign language services. However, ‘World Service’ quickly became the most common name used to refer to the external broadcasting organization as a whole. Andrew Walker, A Skyful of Freedom: 60 Years of the BBC World Service (London, 1992), 158.
speech outlined his vision for a grand project designed to enable ‘the process of the recreation of plural societies’ in the former Soviet bloc. \(^5\) Just as the USA had provided Western Europe with a ‘Marshall Plan’ for economic recovery after the Second World War, so the West must now deliver a ‘Marshall Plan of the Mind’ to post-socialist Eastern Europe—a plan with the BBC at its very heart. \(^6\)

This article evaluates the historical significance of the BBC Marshall Plan of the Mind (MPM) organization, which was created soon after Tusa’s RSA speech. It outlines the nature of MPM’s work in post-Communist Eastern Europe during the 1990s, showing how despite the World Service’s celebrated commitment to impartiality, MPM transmitted undeniably pro-capitalist and pro-British narratives to its considerable audiences in the region. More significantly, it argues that while MPM was in some ways a very specific response to the end of the Cold War, it was in fact just one manifestation of the BBC’s longer-term commitment to supporting British interests abroad through its overseas development work. The creation of MPM was, I argue, symptomatic of the World Service’s efforts since the end of empire to cultivate a new image for itself—depicting itself as not just a trusted international broadcaster, but also as a fundamentally humanitarian organization, an ‘Oxfam of the Mind’ which used its broadcasting expertise to help uplift humanity as a whole. \(^7\)

Drawing on a combination of archival sources, oral history interviews, and published primary materials, this article argues for MPM’s historical significance as the first BBC-branded NGO. It outlines exactly how and why the World Service took the decision to create its own BBC-branded overseas development NGO in the 1990s, arguing that this development reflected the BBC’s growing recognition since at least the 1960s that it could derive significant benefits by aligning itself, both rhetorically and operationally, with the overseas development sector. In doing so, this work provides valuable evidence not only of the World Service’s continuing role as a tool of British power on the global stage in the post-imperial

---

4 John Tusa, *Making a Noise: Getting It Right, Getting It Wrong in Life, Arts and Broadcasting* (London, 2018).
5 Reagan et al, ‘Eastern Europe’, 38.
6 Reagan et al, ‘Eastern Europe’, 38.
7 This phrase was first used to describe the BBC World Service in a promotional booklet created by the BBC’s Chief Publicity Officer Michael Williams in September 1976. According to this document, it was adapted from a comment by Malcolm W. Browne, Eastern Europe Correspondent of the New York Times, who wrote in a letter to a fellow-journalist that ‘one can only hope that Britain will sustain the will to go on with the BBC more or less as it is. BBC is, for the free mind, what Oxfam is for the hungry’. ‘The Oxfam of the Mind: A Selection of Published Comment on BBC’s External Services’, September 1976. E62/33: Audience Research Reports / Listener Letters, BBC External Services Collection, BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham.
era, but also of the growing significance of the overseas development NGO as a vehicle for projecting British influence overseas in that period.

The following section examines the basis of the BBC World Service’s historic reputation as an independent, impartial, and benevolent ‘global public service broadcaster’. Next, the article delves into the case study of the MPM itself, outlining the nature of its interventions in Eastern Europe, and examining its credentials and historical significance as a BBC-branded overseas development NGO. MPM is then contextualized in relation to the World Service’s earlier overseas development work, and situated as a direct precursor to the contemporary BBC-branded overseas development NGO, BBC Media Action.

The BBC World Service as a ‘Global Public Service Broadcaster’

In his speech to the RSA, John Tusa highlighted three main reasons why, in his opinion, the BBC World Service ought to play a leading role within Western efforts to help rebuild Eastern Europe and the (soon to be former) Soviet Union after the fall of Communism. The key characteristics he claimed the World Service possessed were independence, impartiality, and expertise.

First, he argued that the World Service was recognized throughout the world for its institutional independence. Throughout its history, the World Service has always insisted on its editorial independence, and as part of the BBC, its sovereignty over editorial decisions has been enshrined within the corporation’s Royal Charter, a constitutional document which limits the UK government’s ability to directly control what the BBC broadcasts. Unsurprisingly, scholars have enquired into the nature of this ‘independence’, in some cases powerfully critiquing the BBC’s claims that this charter really does enable the organization to act as a ‘public service broadcaster’ free from government influence.

---

8 Tusa’s speech was given on October 17th, 1991, ten weeks before the dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 26th.

9 The BBC website has a section dedicated to the history of the BBC Royal Charter, outlining the continuities between the first charter granted in January 1927 and the most recent in January 2017. BBC Royal Charter Archive, <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/research/royal-charter> accessed 28 May 2020.

10 Tom Mills’ 2016 history of the BBC represents the most vehement academic denial of the BBC’s independence from government: Tom Mills, The BBC: Myth of a Public Service (London, 2016). James Cook’s 2017 article examines a concrete example of government censorship of BBC broadcasting to domestic audiences, revealing how the Wilson government forced the BBC to cancel its planned broadcast of the controversial post-apocalyptic nuclear docudrama The War Game in 1965. James Cook, ‘Who Banned the War Game? A Fifty Year Controversy Reassessed’, Journal of British Cinema and Television, 14 (2017), 39–63. On the limits of the BBC’s approach to dealing with a sensitive domestic topic like multiculturalism in a ‘balanced’ and ‘neutral’ way, see Gavin Schaffer, The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television, 1960-1980 (Basingstoke, 2014). See also Georgina Born, Uncertain Visions: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC (London, 2005); Peter Goodwin,
in some respects particularly vulnerable to such criticism, since unlike the ‘domestic’ BBC, which has historically been funded by a licence fee paid directly by its users, it has typically depended on a direct grant-in-aid from the UK government for their funding. Despite this, Tusa could still make a strong case for the World Service’s independence. Indeed, defenders of the World Service can point to numerous episodes throughout its history where the organization did successfully resist government efforts to prescribe what it could and could not broadcast to foreign audiences. Most famously, the BBC successfully fought off the Eden government’s attempts to censor its reporting to foreign audiences on British opposition to military intervention during the Suez Crisis in 1956. This episode was regularly referred to thereafter whenever the World Service was called upon to establish its credentials as an independent broadcasting organization, separate from government.

Secondly, Tusa argued that the World Service was impartial. He made the case that even during the Cold War, in which the UK sat firmly on one side of a binary geopolitical and ideological contest, the BBC had refused to allow its Eastern European language services to broadcast anything overtly anti-Communist, declaring that “our job” was never to destroy the totalitarian governments; it was to inform the citizens of those countries, a crucial difference. During the last 30 years, questions about what it meant to broadcast ‘truth’ across the Iron Curtain have fascinated scholars and students of the so-called ‘Cultural Cold War’, particularly those interested in the relationship between Western international broadcasters and covert intelligence agencies like the CIA or semi-secret government units like the UK’s ‘Information Research Department’.

\[\text{\textquoteleft \text{Low Conspiracy? – Government interference in the BBC}, Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 2 (2015), 96–118.}\]

11 The BBC’s overseas broadcasting operations were funded by an annual or triennial grant-in-aid from the UK government (mostly administered by the Foreign Office) from soon after the foundation of the BBC Empire Service in 1932 until 2014. At this point, the World Service became funded by the licence fee for the first time, although even then, its budget continued to be supplemented by a variety of specific UK government grants for particular language services. The fullest account of the World Service’s funding history is in Gordon Johnston and Emma Robertson’s recently published and comprehensive history: Gordon Johnston and Emma Robertson, BBC World Service: Overseas Broadcasting, 1932-2018 (London, 2019).

12 Alban Webb’s book on the BBC External Services and the (early) Cold War gives a full account of the Suez Crisis issue: Alban Webb, London Calling: Britain, the BBC World Service and the Cold War (London, 2014), 157–84.

13 For example, in a September 1982 article in The Listener magazine, then-Managing Director of the World Service Douglas Muggeridge proudly declared that despite severe pressure from the Foreign Office to abandon its ‘normal policy of impartiality and objectivity’ during the Suez Crisis, ‘the BBC stood firm throughout’. Douglas Muggeridge, ‘The BBC’s External Services: An Organisation which Tells the Truth and Is Believed’, The Listener, 2 September 1982, p. 8. The Listener Historical Archive, 1929–1991 <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/92Mrt9> accessed 19 February 2021.

14 Reagan et al, ‘Eastern Europe’, 36.
is an extensive historiography of Cold War broadcasting, with much of it focused on the roles of US-funded broadcasters Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, rather than the BBC World Service, which has so far received far less attention. Unsurprisingly, histories written by the former employees of these Western broadcasters (many of which were published in the decade following the end of the Cold War) tended towards a triumphalist presentation of their work, framing the history of Cold War international broadcasting as a story of ‘truth’, ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ overcoming the ‘propaganda’ and ‘totalitarianism’ of the Soviet bloc. However, since the turn of the millennium, scholars have critically engaged with this narrative, emphasizing that international broadcasters’ historical significance lies not so much in their roles as a source of ‘truth’ or ‘objective information’, but in their positionality as sites for the transnational and multidirectional exchange of ideas, and for the creation of new, complex identities among both their listeners and employees.

The BBC World Service was particularly successful among Western international broadcasters in portraying itself as a relatively trusted source of valuable information to its listeners in the Communist bloc, particularly towards the end of the Cold War. A 1984 Soviet treatise on the BBC’s ‘history, apparatus, methods of radio propaganda’, while denouncing the BBC’s Russian language broadcasting as politically motivated anti-Soviet interference, admitted that these broadcasts were difficult for the Soviet authorities to discredit, describing them as ‘factological propaganda’ whose bias ‘can be uncovered only by means of a specialised, lengthy and painstaking analysis’. Even those leading the Soviet Union

15 For a compelling overview of the CIA’s role in funding Western artistic, cultural, and intellectual work during the Cold War, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London, 1999). On the links between the CIA and Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, see A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Washington, D.C., 2010). For more on the clandestine role of the Information Research Department in linking the British secret intelligence services with major political and media organizations in the UK, including the BBC World Service, see Hugh Wilford, ‘The Information Research Department: Britain’s Secret Cold War Weapon Revealed’, *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), 353–69.

16 See for example Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, 2000); G. Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War within the Cold War* (New Haven, 1997). Official histories of the BBC World Service written by former employees have tended to frame their organization’s overall mission in similar terms: see Gerard Mansell, *Let Truth Be Told: 50 Years of the BBC External Services* (London, 1982) and Walker’s *A Skyful of Freedom*.

17 See Anna Bischof and Zuzana Jürgens, eds, *Voices of Freedom - Western Interference?: 60 Years of Radio Free Europe* (Gottingen, 2015); Alec Badenoch, et al., *Airy Curtains in the European Ether: Broadcasting and the Cold War* (Baden-Baden, 2013); Linda Risso, “Introduction” in “Radio Wars: Broadcasting in the Cold War”, *Cold War History*, 13 (2013), 145–52.

18 Vladimir Artyomov and Vladimir Semyonov, ‘The BBC: History, Apparatus, Methods of Radio Propaganda’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 4 (2007), 73–89, 117. It is important to note that the article cited is in fact a summary and translation of the original 1984 article written by Artyomov and Semyonov, summarized and translated by David
turned to the BBC at times of crisis: Mikhail Gorbachev famously tuned into the BBC’s Russian Service while under house arrest during the failed military coup against his leadership in December 1991, stating in a press conference soon after his release that ‘the BBC was best of all’ in helping him to keep up to date with developments while cut off from the outside world.\(^{19}\)

Finally, Tusa made the case to his audience at the RSA that the World Service’s expertise was very much in demand beyond Britain’s borders. He explained that requests from newly installed governments in Eastern Europe, asking for the BBC to share its technical, journalistic, and broadcasting expertise, were ‘intense, continuing, [and] varied ... we have not begun to meet—let alone satisfy the need’.\(^{20}\) In support of this argument, Tusa might have turned to a recent statement by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Poland’s first Prime Minister of the multi-party era, who in February of 1990 declared that ‘what we need in Poland is the BBC style of journalism. It is dispassionate and unbiased, looking at an event and analysing it from several points of view ... such journalism is a necessary element in the process of absorbing the values of pluralist democracy’.\(^{21}\) This kind of endorsement provided the ideal justification for the BBC to get involved in building a new, post-Communist Eastern Europe.

These three characteristics—independence, impartiality, and internationally sought-after expertise—were deemed by Tusa to place the World Service in a special category, separate from and elevated above any other international broadcaster which had operated during the Cold War. Indeed, Tusa later argued that the World Service was more than an international broadcaster, characterizing it instead as a global public service broadcaster—an organization whose ‘broadcasting and journalistic principles have remained remarkably constant and non-political’ and whose mission was ‘to give a global perspective on international events to a global audience’.\(^{22}\) According to this vision of the World Service, the organization did not just serve Britain’s narrow national or political interests, but truly served the world: as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is reported to have said in 1999, it was ‘perhaps Britain’s greatest gift to the world in the twentieth century’.\(^{23}\)

Wedgwood Benn, formerly of both the BBC Russian Service and the Information Research Department.

19 Walker, A Skyful of Freedom, 138–9.

20 Reagan et al, ‘Eastern Europe’. 37.

21 BBC International Press Release, Feb 22nd 1990. E62/43/1: Polish Journalists - BBC Training Programme, 1 January 1990 to 31 December 1990, BBC External Services Collection.

22 John Tusa, ‘BBC World Service as a Public-Sector Broadcaster’, The World Today, 48 (1992), 230–33.

23 Quoted in House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, ‘The Implications of the Cuts to the BBC World Service’, HC 849, 13 April 2011. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmfaff/849/849.pdf> accessed 28 May 2020.
Much of the existing scholarship on the World Service critically examines the basis of its claims to independence, impartiality, and expertise, although historians have yet to focus as much attention on the organization’s history since the end of empire. For those interested in Britain’s more recent history, it is notable that these characteristics (independence, impartiality, and expertise) bear more than a passing resemblance to those identified as crucial in explaining the so-called ‘rise of the NGO’ since the 1960s. As Matthew Hilton and his co-authors convincingly argue, from this time onwards many previously small-scale and volunteer-run NGOs expanded, professionalized, and took on new, influential roles within the world of politics and governance, in large part thanks to their (carefully cultivated) reputations as trusted providers of independent, impartial expertise.

So far, there has been surprisingly little scholarly reflection on this correlation between the stated core values of the BBC and the NGO sector. Some excellent recent work, including that of Eve Colpus, Suzanne Franks, Andrew Jones, and Tehila Sasson, has examined the BBC’s role in facilitating and shaping the nature of charity fundraising in twentieth century Britain. Yet these works have typically approached these two entities—the BBC and the charities or NGOs it provided a fundraising platform to—as organizations which, while sometimes collaborating and perhaps at times sharing the same ‘benevolent’ aims, were essentially distinct and separate from each other. The question of whether the BBC,

---

24 On the BBC’s role in maintaining the sentimental bonds of empire overseas from its creation until the end of empire, see Simon Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970* (Oxford, 2012). On the impartiality of the BBC’s foreign language services during the Second World War, see Nelson Ribeiro and Stephanie Seul, eds, *Revisiting Transnational Broadcasting: The BBC’s Foreign-Language Services during the Second World War* (Abingdon, 2017). On the relationship between the UK government and the BBC’s language services aimed at listeners in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the early Cold War, see Alban Webb, *London Calling: Britain, the BBC World Service and the Cold War* (London and New York, 2014). See also Marie Gillespie and Alban Webb (eds), *Diasporas and Diplomacy: Cosmopolitan Contact Zones at the BBC World Service, 1932-2012* (London, 2012); Gordon Johnston, ‘The BBC World Service and Global Britain’, *History and Policy*, Policy Papers (2020).

25 Matthew Hilton, et al., *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2013).

26 On how NGOs navigated the political sphere while maintaining a rhetorical commitment to remaining ‘apolitical’, see Chapter 5, ‘The Pressure of Politics: Walking the Corridors of Power’, in Hilton, McKay, Crowson and Mouhot, *The Politics of Expertise*, 108–45.

27 Eve Colpus, ‘The Week’s Good Cause: Mass Culture and Cultures of Philanthropy at the Inter-war BBC’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2011), 305–29; Suzanne Franks, ‘Please Send Us Your Money: The BBC’s Evolving Relationship With Charitable Causes, Fundraising and Humanitarian Appeals’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 38 (2018), 866–79; Andrew Jones, ‘The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and the Humanitarian Industry in Britain, 1963-85’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 573–601; Tehila Sasson, ‘In the Name of Humanity: Britain and the Rise of Global Humanitarianism’, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California Berkeley (2015), 123–36.
either as a whole or in part, might usefully be categorized as a kind of NGO, has so far not been tackled by historians of the so-called ‘third sector’. Nor has the subsequent question of what might be at stake if we were to do so.

This article will partially address these questions, through examining the origins, objectives, and practices of the BBC MPM—an entity which should, I argue, be understood as a BBC-branded NGO. This case study is then situated within a longer-term contextual framework, foregrounding the World Service’s use of NGO-related rhetoric to promote and justify its work since the 1960s, as well as its continuing role as an active agent of British overseas development both during and after the end of empire. In doing so, this work hopes to encourage new thinking regarding not only the BBC’s relationship with the state, but also the role(s) that global development NGOs have played in promoting British post-imperial interests overseas.

**Developing and Implementing the MPM, 1991–99**

The MPM has so far received little attention from historians of the BBC, and almost none from scholars of Britain’s post-war foreign policy or overseas development efforts. As a phenomenon of the 1990s, it might be argued that MPM falls into a kind of historical blind spot between the end of the Cold War and the September 11 attacks, a period which is, from today’s perspective, still passing through the uncanny valley between the present and the past. This work might therefore make a

---

28 On the characteristics, multiple definitions, and growing political significance of the ‘quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization’ or ‘quango’ in late twentieth century Britain, see Michael Cole, ‘Quangos: The Debate of the 1970s in Britain’, *Contemporary British History*, 19 (2005), 321–52; ‘Quasi-Government in Britain: The Origins, Persistence and Implications of the Term “Quango”’, *Public Policy and Administration*, 13 (1998), 65–78.

29 The only previous scholarly works to focus on MPM in any detail are Ruth Mandel’s illuminating article examining a Kazakh soap opera created by the MPM in the mid-1990s and James Stewart’s article examining the impact of MPM’s training school established in Bucharest in the mid-1990s. Both draw mostly on the personal experiences of the authors in observing or contributing to the MPM projects they describe. See Ruth Mandel, ‘A Marshall Plan of the Mind: The Political Economy of Kazakh Soap Opera’ in Ginsburg, F.D., Abu-Luhod, L. and Larkin, B., eds, *Media Worlds: Anthropology of New Terrain* (Berkeley, 2002), 211–28; James Stewart, ‘A Suitable Case For Transplant? The BBC and Public Service Journalism in Post-Communist Romania’, *Journalism Practice*, 7 (2013), 329–44. MPM is briefly mentioned as a forerunner to the BBC World Service Trust in Caroline Sugg and Gerry Power, ‘Great Expectations and Creative Evolution: The History of Drama for Development at the BBC World Service Trust’ in Andrew Skuse, Marie Gillespie, and Gerry Power, eds, *Drama for Development: Cultural Translation and Social Change* (New Delhi, 2011).

30 The decade was described, revealingly if not unproblematically, as a ‘Holiday from History’ by journalist Jonathan Freedland in a 2018 BBC Radio 4 documentary. J. Freedland, ‘The 90s: A Holiday from History’, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast September 1st 2018. Accessible online at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08n1hnh>. I am grateful to Dr David Geiringer for making me aware of this phrase (and programme) during the *Rethinking Britain in the Nineties: Towards a New Research Agenda* virtual workshop series run
useful contribution to understanding how and why Britain seems to have pursued its national interests overseas through nominally non-governmental or ‘apolitical’ organs during this decade.

Key information on the MPM’s origins, aims, outputs, and eventual dissolution can be gleaned from the small number of MPM-related archival documents found within the BBC’s External Services Collection. This material has been supplemented and contextualized by relevant secondary published material, as well as new oral history interviews with former MPM staff and leadership conducted by the author. When combined, this source material provides ample basis for exploring and establishing MPM’s historical significance.

MPM was initially transformed from aspiration to actuality thanks to a UK government unit called the Know-How Fund. According to FCO historian Keith Hamilton, the Fund was initially launched in April 1989 and jointly administered and funded by the Foreign Office and the Overseas Development Ministry, with the initial aim of using targeted grants to help Poland to marketize parts of its economy. However its mission and geographic scope was quickly expanded in response to the collapse of Communist rule across Central and Eastern Europe. The unit was soon tasked with making British ‘know-how’ on a wide range of administrative, educational, commercial, legal, and political matters available to states transitioning away from Communist one-party rule. By the end of 1991, it was administering grants in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Soviet Union, and funding a diverse array of projects, including a new training school for commercial bankers in Katowice and a new Stock Exchange building in Budapest. The BBC World Service was one of many British organizations which secured funding, successfully positioning itself as a reservoir of vital ‘know-how’ which the British government might draw upon to achieve its strategic goals in the region.

BBC archival records show that the World Service had already received its first tranche of Know-How Fund money by February 1990, some 20 months before John Tusa’s speech to the RSA. It used the money to deliver a 6-week training course in the UK for a select group of six Polish journalists. While little evidence regarding the nature or impact

by Dr Geiringer (Queen Mary University London) and Dr Helen McCarthy (University of Cambridge) in early 2021.

31 For a full monographic summary of the Know-How Fund’s work, see Keith Hamilton, Transformational Diplomacy after the Cold War: Britain’s Know-How Fund in Post-Communist Europe, 1989-2003 (London, 2013).
32 Keith Hamilton, ‘The Know-How Fund: The Early Years’, Historians, Records and Historical Services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office General Services Command, April 1997, 15. <https://issuu.com/fcohistorians/docs/hpopub_2> accessed 6 April 2020.
33 Hamilton, ‘The Know-How Fund: The Early Years’, 6.
34 E62/43/1: Polish Journalists—BBC Training Programme, 1 January 1990 to 31 December 1990. External Services Collection.
of this first training course survives, archival documents do show that the BBC subsequently received supplementary Know-How Fund grants to re-run the course, and then expand it to include Hungarian and Czechoslovak participants. In September 1992, the MPM was placed on a new and more permanent organizational footing, as the BBC registered ‘BBC MPM’ with Companies House.

From this point on, MPM operated as a BBC-affiliated yet legally separate charitable trust—a kind of BBC-branded NGO. Obtaining this semi-detached new organizational status was a significant moment. As a separate legal entity, MPM was able to pursue and secure funding streams from international and non-governmental donors in a way that the World Service, as a constituent part of the BBC, was not. Early MPM funding was provided by donors such as the Open Society Institute, an international grant-making network set up by the Hungarian-American billionaire philanthropist George Soros dedicated to promoting the spread of liberal democratic values and principles in the former Communist world. These donations significantly supplemented the funding provided by the Know-How Fund. MPM thus appears to be the first time that BBC World Service-branded programmes and training projects were created using money provided by anyone other than the British state.

With valuable external funding and a flexible organizational status secured, MPM got to work. The organization quickly moved on from providing short training courses for a handful of Central and Eastern European journalists in the UK, instead setting up specialized BBC-branded media training schools in key Eastern European cities including Bucharest, Yekaterinburg, and Sarajevo. Funded jointly by the Know-How Fund (around 70 per cent) and the Open Society Institute (30 per cent), the BBC Media School in Bucharest trained around 500 Romanian radio and TV journalists between 1992 and 2001.

35 E62/43/1: Polish Journalists—BBC Training Programme, 1 January 1990 to 31 December 1990.
36 Memorandum of Association, Companies House, September 7th 1992. <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/02746733/filing-history?page=6> accessed 14 May 2020.
37 ‘Marshall Plan of the Mind’, Memorandum submitted by the BBC World Service, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs Minutes of Evidence, House of Commons, September 1999. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmselect/cmfaff/815/9101206.htm> 28 May 2020. On the Open Society Institute (now Open Society Foundations), see <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/who-we-are/our-history>.
38 ‘The Know How Fund’, Subsection 170, Section IV: Achieving the UK’s Objectives in the Bilateral Context, Relations with the Russian Federation, Third Report, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, 15th February 2000. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmfaff/101/10110.htm#a45> accessed 10 April 2020.
39 Stewart, ‘A Suitable Case for Transplant?’ 336.
technical standards (recording, editing, scripting, presenting) and the principles of public service journalism’. In an article written in 2013, Stewart argues that in hindsight, these training schools were ultimately unsuccessful in achieving their aim of helping to establish a sustainable new model for public service journalism in Eastern Europe. Yet the establishment and existence of these schools demonstrates MPM’s ambition to play a leading role in developing a new approach to journalistic practice in ‘New Europe’.

MPM also threw itself into producing a new and ambitious range of educational radio and television programming for Eastern European audiences. Archival evidence illustrating this is frustratingly scant. However, a market research report produced in Russia in September 1996 on MPM’s behalf has survived, providing significant insight into the nature, content, aims, and target audience of MPM programmes for Russian audiences. The report summarizes the market research firm’s findings relating to a series of focus groups held in the Russian city of Novosibirsk. Viewers of the MPM-produced television documentary series Udalos! (‘Succeeding!’), broadcast in the spring of 1996 by the Russian domestic TV channel RTR, were asked for their opinions on the programme.

Each of the five episodes of Udalos! focused on a different sector of the contemporary Russian economy (heavy industry, light industry, agriculture, education, and culture). The series was presented by Alexander Gurnov, a familiar and respected figure among Russian television audiences, who had presented national news coverage both before and after the fall of Communism. Focusing on a different case study each week, it explained how new production, management, and marketing techniques imported from the West were being successfully adopted by companies adjusting to the new economic circumstances. Focus group members quizzed by the market research company were particularly positive about an episode which followed the fortunes of fashion houses in the

40 Stewart, ‘A Suitable Case for Transplant?’ 336.
41 Archival primary sources on MPM are very limited, with only two slim files relating to MPM held at the BBC’s Written Archives Centre. E3/1350/1 Eurasia: BBC MPM (Marshall Plan of the Mind); E62/43/1: Polish Journalists—BBC Training Programme, 1 January 1990 to 31 December 1990. External Services Collection. The National Archives’ Treasury and Foreign Office records contain a handful of Know How Fund files which are available to researchers, but none which mention MPM: T 631/364: USSR Know-How Fund; T 651/39: Know-How Fund for Soviet Union; FO 973/711: Britain’s Know How Fund; FO 972/233: Know How Fund for Eastern Europe. The National Archives, Kew.
42 ‘Report - BBC MPM Qualitative Report on Project “Udalos!” [Succeeding!], September 1996—Russian Market Research Company’, E3/1350/1 Eurasia: BBC MPM (Marshall Plan of the Mind), BBC External Services Collection.
43 One section of the report describes how the focus groups ‘described A. Gurnov as a nice and attractive person, whose speech was clear and easy to understand’. ‘Report - BBC MPM Qualitative Report on Project “Udalos!” [Succeeding!], September 1996—Russian Market Research Company’, E3/1350/1 Eurasia: BBC MPM (Marshall Plan of the Mind), BBC External Services Collection.
According to their responses, these episodes showed how ‘a designer from a small provincial town [was] … capable of getting clients even from the U.S.’ by using innovative designs, new marketing techniques, and collaborating with Western companies to find a niche in a globalized market.26

All episodes of Udalos! were clearly intended to emphasize the same core message: that Russian businesses, organizations, and individuals were already making a ‘success’ of life after Communism, and that closer economic relations with the West in the future would only accelerate and consolidate that success. Crucially, according to the evidence contained within the market research report, Udalos! was identifiable to its audiences as a product of the BBC. Moreover, this BBC branding was considered as an important signifier of the quality of the programme by its Russian viewers. The author of the report wrote that when focus group members were asked about who was responsible for producing the series, they responded that ‘the producers were believed to be “professionals from BBC” who support reforms in Russia, whose hearts bleed for Russia’.44 This evidence shows how MPM used the BBC’s pre-existing reputation in Russia to try and shape the Russian television-watching public’s opinions and emotions in a pro-capitalist direction.

Outside of Russia, MPM devised programming which was even more direct in promoting the benefits of the transition to capitalism, and in publicizing the UK’s particular contribution to this process. A 1994 article in the trade journal Outlook on Agriculture, penned by World Service producer Tim Grout-Smith, outlined how MPM was playing a key economic role in newly independent Ukraine by ‘spreading the message through radio and television’ about the ‘attempts … being made to revive Ukrainian agriculture using Western technology, management and marketing’.45 One episode of a five-part series produced by MPM for Ukrainian television audiences featured a former state-run collective farm in rural Western Ukraine, which had recently been purchased by the British Food Consortium ‘to show agronomists from the state sector how British methods and practice could work in Ukraine’.46 The series was made possible by a special grant of £460,000 from the UK government’s Know-How Fund.47

---

44 ‘Report—BBC MPM Qualitative Report on Project “Udalos!” [Succeeding!], September 1996—Russian Market Research Company’, E3/1350/1 Eurasia: BBC MPM (Marshall Plan of the Mind), BBC External Services Collection.
45 Tim Grout-Smith, ‘Agricultural Reform in Ukraine: Spreading the Message’, Outlook on Agriculture, 23 (1994), 287–91.
46 Grout-Smith, ‘Agricultural Reform in Ukraine’, 288.
47 Grout-Smith, ‘Agricultural Reform in Ukraine’, 287.
The Ukrainian face of the series was provided by Mykola and Tamara Sobchuk, a farming couple who were flown over to East Anglia (`Britain’s nearest equivalent to Ukrainian farming’) to be filmed while commenting approvingly on the machinery, agro-chemical products, and management techniques being used on some of Britain’s largest commercial farms. The series emphasized the Sobchuks’ relatability and trustworthiness as authentic representatives of Ukraine’s rural community, with wife Tamara playing a pivotal supporting role as the embodiment of the ‘jolly homely Ukrainian mother’. Yet the Sobchuks were, in reality, far from a ‘typical’ farming couple—in fact, Mykola had travelled to the UK numerous times before, having entered into a commercial partnership with ICI, one of the UK’s most prominent multinational corporations and a market-leading producer of agricultural products such as seed and fertilizer, some years before the making of the programme.

Further evidence suggests a close relationship between MPM and ICI. Grout-Smith’s feature on MPM’s work in Ukraine published in *Outlook on Agriculture* was in fact sponsored by the chemical company, and most strikingly of all, Companies House records show that between September 1992 and 1996, ICI executive John Cheason Mitchell sat on the Board of Directors of the MPM Trust. While these facts do not prove that ICI had any direct editorial control over the content or style of MPM programming, they do support the conclusion that this major British corporation believed it stood to gain commercially from supporting and promoting MPM’s work in Eastern Europe.

Perhaps the most famous MPM programme of all was *Dom Syem Podyest Chtery* (‘House Seven, Entrance Four’), a daily Russian-language radio soap opera telling stories of everyday life in a contemporary Moscow apartment block. In a June 1996 speech given at Chatham House, John Tusa’s successor as Managing Director of the World Service, Sam Younger, described the series as ‘a version of *The Archers*’. Young explained how the show was ‘designed to put across a lot of messages about life in the [former] Soviet Union, and about issues of family relationships, of starting up businesses, of community affairs, civic responsibility and so on’. *Dom Syem* was produced in Moscow by a team of

---

48 Grout-Smith, ‘Agricultural Reform in Ukraine’, 289.
49 Grout-Smith, ‘Agricultural Reform in Ukraine’, 290.
50 Grout-Smith, ‘Agricultural Reform in Ukraine’, 289.
51 ‘Directors and Secretaries: The BBC Marshall Plan of the Mind Trust’, Companies House. <https://companycheck.co.uk/company/02746734/THE-BBC-MARSHALL-PLAN-OF-THE-MIND-TRUST/companies-house-data> accessed 19 May 2020.
52 Sam Younger, ‘International Broadcasting in the 21st Century: BBC World Service Plans for the Future’, Chatham House, 26 June 1996. Speech accessed online at <//www.chathamhouse.org/library/chatham-house-online-archive> accessed 10 April 2020.
53 Younger, ‘International Broadcasting in the 21st Century’. On the origins of *The Archers* as a government-backed tool for encouraging agricultural modernization in rural post-war Britain, see William J. Brown and Arvind Singhal, ‘Entertainment-Education Media
Russian writers and actors, initially overseen by a British former producer of *The Archers*, Liz Rigbey. While accurate listening numbers are not available, *Dom Syem* does seem to have gained a significant audience in post-Soviet Russia: a report in the *Independent* newspaper suggested that Downing Street estimated its daily audience in October 1997 at around 3 million, while in his memoir, John Tusa remarked that the soap ‘became very popular, sometimes attracting the biggest audience of the day’. Thanks to a special broadcasting agreement between the BBC and Radio Moscow, *Dom Syem* was the first BBC programme ever heard on domestic (FM) Russian radio frequencies. It was thus almost certainly listened to by far larger audiences than any programmes ever broadcast by the World Service’s Russian language service, which still broadcast on the far less user-friendly short-wave band.

Back in the UK, the programme caught the attention of the incoming New Labour government. During a two-day state visit to Russia in October 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair toured MPM’s studio in Moscow, even making a brief appearance in an episode of *Dom Syem*. In his somewhat awkward cameo, Blair (playing himself) stops his motorcade to help lead character Varya to pick up fallen groceries, before conversing with her via his translator about the benefits of ‘education, education, education’. In a short TV interview given immediately after his star turn, Blair stated that ‘there’s a lot of confidence in Britain abroad, and there’s a lot happening here in Russia ... if we can use our position in order to help British trade and British investment and Britain’s standing in the world, then great. And if it takes starring in a soap opera then I’m delighted’. For Blair, MPM’s utility lay squarely in its value as a tool for supporting British commercial and diplomatic interests in Russia. MPM’s willingness to use its platform (and the BBC brand) to promote those interests—whether subtly or otherwise—cannot be ignored.

Strategies for Social Change: Promises and Problems’ in D. Demers and K. Viswanath, eds, *Mass Media, Social Control, and Social Change: A Macrosocial Perspective* (London, 1999), 263–80.

A brief but colourful first-hand account of Rigbey’s role in overseeing *Dom Syem* can be found in the autobiography of Charles Collingwood, a member of *The Archers* cast who visited the MPM office in Moscow in December 1992. Charles Collingwood, *Brian and Me: Life On – And Off – The Archers* (London, 2009).

Stephen Castle, ‘An Everyday Story of Russian Working Folk – Starring Tony Blair’, *The Independent*. 5 October 1997. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/an-everyday-story-of-russian-working-folk-starring-tony-blair-1233970.html> accessed 22 April 2020.

John Tusa, *Making a Noise: Getting It Right, Getting It Wrong in Life, Arts and Broadcasting* (London, 2018), 280.

Castle, ‘An Everyday Story’.

‘Russia: Moscow: Tony Blair Ends by Starring in Soap Opera’, AP Archive, 6 October 1997. <http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/04110a52064e019131eb03e87a761bd> accessed 22 April 2020.

‘Tony Blair Ends by Starring in Soap Opera’, AP Archive.
These brief overviews of three MPM-created series all demonstrate how the organization sought to play a vital role in promoting British (and more broadly ‘Western’) political and commercial interests in Eastern Europe during the early 1990s. Using the BBC brand and funding from the UK government’s overseas development budget, alongside money provided by non-governmental foundations like the Open Society Institute, MPM encouraged domestic radio and television audiences in the region to accept the emergence of the Western, liberal democratic, capitalist model of statehood as the natural and preferred successor to state socialism, and to look on the increased involvement of British firms in their economies as a sign of progress and future prosperity. In MPM, the World Service had created a BBC-branded charitable NGO which placed the BBC’s global reputation for independence, impartiality, and expertise at the disposal of a specific group of national and international donors.

MPM in Context: The BBC World Service as British Overseas Development Actor

While these examples demonstrate the pro-British intent (if not the impact) of MPM’s work in post-socialist Eastern Europe, the question remains as to how to situate MPM within the broader history of the World Service. Should MPM be considered as an aberration, a well-meaning and relatively insignificant expression of the exuberance and optimism for democratic capitalism engendered by the end of the Cold War? Or is the MPM case study illustrative of a longer-term trend within the history of the World Service? Perhaps even more crucially, what can the MPM case study tell us about the relationship between the BBC and the world of the NGO?

It is clearly the case that in many ways, MPM did represent a radical new departure for the World Service. A former Head of MPM, Corinna Furse (who was already a seasoned staff member before joining MPM, having begun working for the World Service in 1984), remembers how MPM’s work felt ‘so new and exciting’, as she and her colleagues were posted across Eastern Europe to deliver training programmes and attended meetings in the City of London with major consultancy firms like Arthur Andersen to seek advice on how MPM might access new funding streams from major global philanthropic organizations. MPM’s setup as a small, separate charitable trust made it far more organizationally nimble than the World Service proper, able to react quickly and decisively when new funding opportunities or collaborative possibilities arose. It operated in the style of a small overseas development-focused

60 Online interview with Corinna Furse (Former Head of MPM), conducted by author in June 2020.
NGO, while benefitting from the status and global caché of the BBC brand.

Yet while the creation of a BBC-branded NGO was undoubtedly a new enterprise for the World Service, overseas development had been an important and underappreciated part of the organization’s mission since at least the 1960s. Indeed, the relationship between the World Service and the UK’s official overseas development agencies is almost as old as the World Service itself. After its foundation in 1932, the BBC Empire Service quickly became involved in the British government’s plans for ‘colonial development’.61 Simon Potter has explored the figure of the ‘lonely listener in the bush’ as the Empire Service’s original imagined audience, emphasizing the service’s aim to maintain sentimental links between the (overwhelmingly white and male) Britons called to serve the Empire in far-flung places and their home country.62 But this was not its only imagined imperial function. In 1936, the Colonial Office’s Committee on Broadcasting Services in the Colonies (also known as the Plymouth Committee) concluded that dedicated colonial broadcasting services were essential for the economic and social development of Britain’s colonies. It proposed that the BBC, acting on government instruction and with extra government funding, should play a leading role in bringing this about.63

Over the next 30 years, the BBC functioned not just as the provider of sentimental sonic connections between agents of British colonialism and the metropole, but as one of the British government’s most significant partners in the project of colonial development.64 Between 1948 and 1962, a senior member of BBC staff was permanently seconded to the Colonial Office to provide professional advice to the government of the day on how best to integrate the BBC’s broadcasting and technical expertise into their colonial development strategies.65 Under the instruction of the Colonial Office, a team of nearly sixty BBC employees was deployed to Nigeria between 1950 and 1962 to help establish and run a new Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, with senior BBC staff retaining a significant presence within its management team well after Nigeria declared independence in 1960.66

---

61 On the nature of post-war British colonial development policies, see Charlotte Lydia Riley, “Tropical Allsorts”: The Transnational Flavor of British Development Policies in Africa’, *Journal of World History*, 26 (2015), 839–64.
62 Simon Potter, *Wireless Internationalism: Wireless Internationalism and Distant Listening: Britain, Propaganda, and the Invention of Global Radio, 1920-1939* (Oxford, 2020), 171–200.
63 Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 81–82.
64 See for example Sydney W. Head, ‘British Colonial Broadcasting Policies: The Case of the Gold Coast’, *African Studies Review*, 22 (1979), 39–47; J. F. Wilkinson, ‘The BBC and Africa’, *African Affairs*, 71 (1972), 176–85.
65 Wilkinson, ‘The BBC and Africa’, 178.
66 Wilkinson ‘The BBC and Africa’, 179.
Figures like Tom Chalmers, who led these efforts in Nigeria before taking on a similar role in Tanzania from 1958 to 1962, ensured that the BBC maintained a key role in supporting the British state’s overseas development work, even as the era of formal colonial rule in Africa came to an end. In recognition of his expertise, Chalmers was appointed by the UN to act as a Deputy Regional Representative on its Technical Assistance Board in Tanzania for two years, before returning to the BBC in 1964 to act as its first ‘Special Assistant in Overseas and Foreign Relations’. In this latter role, he cultivated a strong working relationship between the BBC and the UK’s newly created Overseas Development Ministry (ODM).

Having successfully transitioned from a senior management role overseeing colonial development projects to a UN position as a doyen of ‘technical assistance’, Chalmers typified the BBC’s wider success in portraying itself as eminently qualified to play a prominent role in the new world of post-colonial overseas development which emerged from the 1960s. In a report produced for the ODM in February 1967, Chalmers outlined the BBC’s track record in providing journalistic training courses and ‘expert advice and services’ for overseas broadcasters, describing how ‘in the last ten years, 700 production and general trainees have been accepted from 92 countries, and 241 technical trainees from 54 countries’, thanks in large part to funding provided by the ODM and Commonwealth Relations Office or their predecessor, the Colonial Office. The report anticipated and advocated for the strengthening and deepening the BBC’s relationship with the ODM, building on the basis of these previous partnerships.

Archival records detailing the exact nature and extent of the BBC’s collaboration with the British state on overseas development projects since the mid-1960s are yet to be fully explored. Yet published material from the period shows that the BBC’s relationship with the ODM was frequently mentioned, and even celebrated within the BBC throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. For example, each year’s official BBC handbook produced between 1965 and 1990 featured reports on ‘Overseas Development’.

67 Leonard Miall, ‘Obituary: Tom Chalmers’, The Independent, 4 September 1995.
68 Miall, ‘Obituary’, 1995.
69 On the creation of the Overseas Development Ministry, see Barrie Ireton, Britain’s International Development Policies: A History of DFID and Overseas Aid (London, 2013), 18–35.
70 On the wider phenomenon of individuals and institutions adapting and repackaging their colonial expertise for the age of post-colonial overseas development, see Eva-Maria Muschik, ‘The Art of Chameleon Politics: From Colonial Servant to International Development Expert’, Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development, 9 (2018), 219–44.
71 Tom Chalmers, ‘BBC Aid to Overseas Broadcasting Organisations’, February 1967, E30/76/1, Aid: BBC Aid to Developing Countries, BBC External Services Collection.
72 The author’s ability to access more relevant files held at the BBC’s Written Archives Centre and the National Archives has been hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic.
Development’ or ‘Aid to Overseas Broadcasters’, identifying these efforts as an integral element of the World Service’s work. The 1966 edition proudly stated that during that year alone, the BBC had deployed staff members to provide expert advice to broadcasters in ‘Aden, Bechuanaland, Ceylon, Israel, Kenya, Laos, Malawi, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Nigeria, Singapore, the Solomon Islands, Uganda, Thailand, and Zambia’, with the majority this overseas work made possible thanks to the ODM’s financial support.73 These handbooks also reveal how the ODM provided the World Service with funding to provide training courses aimed at overseas journalists throughout these decades, mostly supporting journalists from the developing countries of the Commonwealth.74 This regular allocation of extra funding drawn from the ODM’s official aid budget was in addition to the regular annual grant-in-aid the World Service received from the Foreign Office.

While the amount of money that the UK government was willing to provide to the BBC for overseas development schemes ebbed and flowed, the fundamental assumption that the BBC played an integral role within Britain’s official overseas development efforts remained constant. The World Service also pursued this overseas development agenda through the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, an international organization dedicated to sharing broadcasting ‘expertise’ between Commonwealth countries, whose headquarters were tellingly located on BBC premises.75 As BBC Head of Staff Training Owen Reed put it in a lunch-time lecture delivered in November 1966, the BBC were unequivocally ‘agents of the Government’s machinery of foreign aid’—and the World Service was at the vanguard of this effort.76

This long history of involvement in British overseas development means that while those who created or staffed MPM may not have recognized it themselves, their work can and should be understood as a later manifestation of this same development-focused way of thinking. Through establishing MPM, the World Service was once again proudly demonstrating its willingness and its suitability to act as a government-funded overseas development agency. What was new about MPM was the geographical context it operated in (Eastern Europe rather than the ‘developing world’), and its organizational status as a BBC-branded NGO.

The World Service already had a history of rhetorically aligning itself with overseas development NGOs before the 1990s. BBC publicity

73 ‘Aid to Overseas Broadcasters’, in 1966 BBC Handbook, 30.
74 ‘International Relations: Training’ sections in BBC Handbooks 1965–1980.
75 On the origins of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (known before 1974 as the Commonwealth Broadcasting Conference) see Potter, Broadcasting Empire, 106.
76 Owen Reed, ‘Training for the World’s Broadcasters’, BBC Lunchtime Lectures, 5th series, 16 November 1966. BBC External Services Collection.
materials produced in the late 1970s and 1980s prominently referred to the World Service as the ‘Oxfam of the Mind’, clearly intending to convey some kind of affinity between itself and Britain’s most famous humanitarian relief organization. Indeed, former World Service Managing Director Gerard Mansell reflected on the ‘Oxfam of the Mind’ metaphor in the final pages of his 1982 history of the organization, concluding that it was ‘a description that was liked in Bush House. It seemed to say it all’.

By the 1990s, the connection between Oxfam and the World Service was more than rhetorical. At the same time that MPM was operating in Eastern Europe, the World Service’s Somali language service was directly collaborating with Oxfam, with the latter providing funding and information to help produce the BBC’s Baafinta series, which used the power of radio to help reunite Somali families divided by civil war. Around this time, the BBC Afghan Service was also collaborating closely with the International Committee of the Red Cross, with the ICRC providing funding and influencing the content of the popular Pashto soap opera Naway Kor, Naway Jawand. These relationships certainly helped the World Service to cultivate its reputation as a serious overseas development actor during the 1990s.

This growing web of relations between the World Service and the international development NGO sector help to explain MPM’s transformation by the end of the decade. Between 1995 and 1998, as the World Service strengthened its status as a truly ‘global’ overseas development actor, MPM gradually dispensed with its original geographical focus on Eastern Europe. Instead, it began securing ever greater amounts of funding from a diverse array of international organizations and philanthropic trusts, launching numerous health-related media development projects all over the world. This new work included a high-profile partnership with the World Health Organization, creating programming to support the WHO’s leprosy elimination campaigns in India, Brazil, Indonesia, Nepal, and Ethiopia. In 1999, the MPM name was retired,

77 See Note 7. See also Andrew Walker, Voice For the World: The work of the BBC External Services (London, 1982), a booklet released to celebrate the organization’s 50th anniversary, which prominently uses the same phrase to describe the World Service.
78 Gerard Mansell, Let Truth Be Told, 265.
79 ‘BBC World Service, Somalia: studio and office costs of a missing persons programme working to reunite family members both within Somali and across the diaspora, 1993-1999’, Box 3307, MS. Oxfam PRF SOM 452. Oxfam Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
80 For a comprehensive overview of the BBC’s use of ‘Drama for Development’ in Afghanistan, see Andrew Skuse, ‘Communication for Development and Public Diplomacy: Insights from an Afghan Radio Drama’ in Gillespie and Webb, Diasporas and Diplomacy, 193–210.
81 ‘BBC Combats Leprosy’, BBC.co.uk, 15 October 1998. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/194106.stm> accessed 21 May 2020.
and the organization was reformed as a new, more globally-focused entity, the BBC World Service Trust.

With this step, the BBC formally launched its own dedicated overseas development charity with a truly global mission. Renamed as BBC Media Action in 2011, the Trust has firmly established itself as a leading voice within its field. Currently operating in twenty-four countries across Asia, Africa and Europe, it regularly receives tens of millions in annual funding from a veritable ‘Who’s Who’ of global development donors, including the UN, the UK government, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. While the scope and scale of the work undertaken by today’s BBC Media Action dwarfs that of MPM, its principles and positionality as a BBC-branded yet organizationally separate NGO clearly and directly build on the MPM’s legacy.

Conclusion: Understanding the Historical Significance of the BBC-branded NGO

The rise and fall of MPM represents a significant episode in the BBC’s history. It helps to illuminate the World Service’s continuous role as an agent of British overseas influence throughout the post-imperial era, and exemplifies the World Service’s decisive turn towards embracing and embedding itself within the NGO sector in the 1990s. But how should we explain exactly why the World Service increasingly chose to situate itself within the NGO sphere during this period?

To establish this, it is important to connect what was happening in the World Service with the wider history of the NGO sector in the UK since the 1960s. This was a period when charitable humanitarian organizations which explicitly identified as ‘non-governmental’ gained increasingly influential and often formalized roles in the field of overseas development. As faith in the modernizing impact of top-down, state-led
international development projects gradually dissipated, NGOs like Oxfam developed a reputation for delivering not just disaster relief, but also longer-term rural development projects at the local or ‘grassroots’ level, gaining in international stature as credible alternative agents of overseas development. 86 NGOs increasingly became embedded within the world of overseas development policymaking and practice, with Western governments providing major grants to these NGOs from their aid budgets. This governmental funding dramatically supplemented, and in some cases even dwarfed, the funds that these NGOs raised from their more ‘traditional’ routes such as charitable appeals to the public. 87

This trend surely helps to explain why the World Service was willing to experiment with NGO status by creating MPM in the early 1990s, before fully committing to the concept of the BBC-branded global development NGO with the formation of the World Service Trust. The World Service was clearly keen to take advantage of the opportunities that the NGO status and ‘brand’ afforded for extending the organization’s influence and resource base in the early 1990s. Fundamentally, setting up a BBC-branded NGO, and aligning the World Service with the NGO sphere more generally, made good business sense for the World Service by the 1990s. The NGO sector’s reputation for ‘apolitical’ international development expertise combined potently with the World Service’s pre-existing ‘brand’ as an independent, impartial and expert international broadcaster, to create a new kind of synergistic ‘super-brand’ which helped the World Service to access new, international sources of funding from global philanthropic and development-focused organizations. At the same time, MPM helped the World Service to reiterate its claims to act as a benign force for good in the world during a time of major geopolitical uncertainty, while simultaneously enhancing its reputation among British foreign policy circles as a potent tool for spreading pro-British messages overseas.

By situating MPM in relation to previous examples of BBC ‘overseas development’ activity since the 1960s, examining the MPM’s aims, historical perspective on the growth of the sector in Britain in the post-war era, see Clare Saunders, ‘British Humanitarian, Aid and Development NGOs, 1949-Present’ in Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton, James McKay, eds, NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics Since 1945 (Basingstoke, 2009), 38–58.

86 Andrew Jones, ‘British Humanitarian NGOs and the Disaster Relief Industry, 1942-1985’, PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham (2014).

87 Akira Iriye, ‘A Century of NGOs’, Diplomatic History, 23 (1999), 421–35. For a case study tracing Amnesty International’s evolution from small-scale human rights NGO to attaining consultative status at the UN and having a significant impact on international law, see Ann Marie Clark, Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and the Changing Human Rights Norms (Princeton, 2001). According to its 2019–20 Annual Report, Oxfam received 45% (£165.3 million) of its income from governments and other public authorities, compared with 22% (£80.7m) from donations and legacies. ‘Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20’, Oxfam GB. <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/documents/264/Oxfam_GB_Annual_Report_2020.pdf> accessed 25 January 2021.
practices and outcomes, and evaluating the World Service’s embrace of NGO status in the 1990s, this article has argued that the World Service is best characterized not as an independent and impartial ‘global public service broadcaster’, but as an active, if largely autonomous agent of British overseas development and foreign policy. As we move towards the celebration of the BBC’s centenary in 2022, it is hoped that this case study might prompt further enquiry into the multiplicities and moral ambiguities of the BBC’s roles as a global actor. It might also inform further efforts to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the state and the NGO sector in late twentieth century Britain and beyond.