

Steve Westlake

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A Global Vision through British Eyes? Approaching the BBC External Services through the  
Blinken OSA's Index on Censorship Collection.

During my month-long research trip at the Open Society Archives, I used the OSA's Index on Censorship Collection to explore the relationship between Index on Censorship and the BBC External Services. Founded in 1972, *Index* was and is a journal dedicated to advocating freedom of expression as a universal human right and publishing authors whose work was censored or repressed by the governments of their home countries. The BBC External Services has been one of the world's leading international radio broadcasters since its foundation as the BBC Empire Service in 1932. Though funded directly by a grant-in-aid from the UK Foreign Office, the BBCXS had by the 1970s developed an enviable global reputation for accuracy, truthfulness, and editorial independence in its reporting, broadcasting both in English and in dozens of foreign languages. These two British media organisations, though vastly different in their size, audiences, and histories, both played a key role in the development of the language and ideas of human rights as a transnational mobilizing discourse within Europe after 1968. *Index's* founding editor, Michael Scammell, recently called the BBC a 'vital source of information', and a number of articles and letters penned by BBCXS employees were published by *Index* from its foundation in 1972 to the present day. The aim of this research trip was to see how the OSA's holdings could illuminate the nature, extent, and limits of the connections between these two organisations, in order to build a thicker historical description of exactly how British media organisations contributed to transnational networks of human rights activism and advocacy.

This work was designed to contribute to the first chapter of my Ph.D dissertation project on the history of the BBCXS between 1965 and 1995, focusing on ways in which the institution's philosophy and sense of 'mission' evolved during these years towards a more humanitarian or human rights-based conception of the role of the BBC's broadcasting operations targeting audiences outside of the United Kingdom. I also aimed to explore the possibility of writing a short stand-alone article on the history of Index on Censorship, combining materials within the OSA's collection (mostly drawn from Index's research operations) with those held by the Bishopsgate Institute in London (who hold Index's corporate archive) to examine the role that Index's physical and intellectual location in London played in its approach to the concepts of censorship and freedom of expression.

Some of the most useful material I uncovered within the OSA's Index on Censorship Collection came from the Country Files fond, HU-OSA-301-0-3. Boxes 166 and 167 from this collection contained two scripts from the BBC Central Talks and Features Department's Current Affairs and Information Section (CARIS), a key department within the BBCXS which produced opinion pieces and reports and analysis which were used by a variety of different language sections across the organisation. These talks range across a variety of topics and provide a record of exactly how the BBC covered major international developments such as the decline of Communism and the rise of multi-party in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This material could be a major source base for my planned dissertation section focusing on the BBCXS's relationship with the 'New Europe' which emerged during this period. These scripts would have been much more difficult to track down within the BBC's own Written Archives Centre in Caversham, England, where access to more recent documents is more limited than that offered to researchers at the OSA. This finding helps to demonstrate the unique value that a more 'open' archive such as the OSA can offer to researchers seeking new perspectives on the history of large institutions like the BBC. This has encouraged me to reflect on my own practice as a researcher and to think more critically about how looking beyond an organisation's own archival collections for documentary evidence, for example through the archives of non-governmental or smaller-scale journalistic organisations, can help create new knowledge about the institution in question. I also hope to arrange a meeting with Gabor Partos, a Hungarian who was the author of the majority of the CARIS reports found in this collection and worked for the BBCXS as a researcher and broadcaster for many years, who is still based in London and whose oral testimony could provide a brand new perspective on meaning-making within the BBCXS during this key period.

The Subject Files of the Collection (HU-OSA-301-0-2) also contained valuable material revealing previously unknown aspects of the early career of a leading figure in the BBCXS's recent history, John Tusa. Tusa served as the Managing Director of the BBCXS between 1986 and 1993, and was instrumental in positioning the BBCXS at the heart of Britain's contribution to the international humanitarian and human rights movements, writing in his memoirs that 'I have always seen the free flow of information as a basic human right, and regard the part that international broadcasting can play in delivering it as one of its most essential functions.'<sup>1</sup> Tusa also wrote an article published by *Index* in 1992, celebrating what he argued was a fundamentally British tradition of freedom of expression in the media, and advocating the BBCXS's role as an independent international broadcaster and a major contributor to universal human rights movement.<sup>2</sup> Within Box 11 of the OSA's Index on Censorship Subject Files, The scripts for a BBC television programme from 1976 entitled 'The Price of Freedom', featuring eight interviews with prominent figures from around the world who had suffered various forms of political repression and limits to their freedom of expression in their home countries. These documents reveal that this series, which helped to frame Britain as an exemplar state for the existence of the right of freedom of expression, was produced by a young John Tusa. It therefore provides invaluable contextual information

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<sup>1</sup> John Tusa: *A World in Your Ear: Reflections on Changes* (London: Broadside Books, 1992), 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> John Tusa, 'Fourth Estate of Fifth Column?' in *Index on Censorship*, Volume 7, 1992.

on Tusa's long-standing and historic commitment to producing programme output which positioned the BBC as firmly on the side of those advocating for freedom of expression as a human right, a decade before his appointment as Managing Director of the BBCXS.

Finally, during my time at the OSA I was introduced to the Peter Pallai Collection (HU-OSA-375), a recent addition to the OSA's holdings donated in 2018 by Peter Pallai, who worked as a journalist and producer at the BBC Hungarian Service for almost 40 years. While most of the material within this collection was focused on the period around the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, and thus fell outside of the chronological focus of my own research, the OSA were able to put me in touch with Mr Pallai, who is now living in Budapest, and arrange a short meeting which provided me with a unique opportunity to add to collect his oral testimony on life as a Hungarian working for the BBCXS in London. Mr Pallai has kindly connected me with a number of other former BBCXS employees who are willing to be interviewed about their views on the humanitarian nature of their work as international broadcasters, providing me with an exciting new source base to supplement my archival findings.

I feel sure that all of this research material will help me to produce a far more nuanced and well-rounded dissertation, providing new insights into the ways that important global developments such as the rise of the human rights movement and the decline of Communism in Europe were responded to and reflected on within the BBCXS. I am grateful to all of those working at the OSA who facilitated and encouraged my work, and look forward to sharing the research outputs which will follow.

Steve Westlake

## Full List of Documents Consulted during OSA Research Trip

### Index on Censorship Collection: HU OSA 301

#### HU OSA 301-0-3 Country Files

Boxes 166, 167: Europe and Central Asia: General: Eastern Europe: Background Information: BBC Talks; Broadcasting (TV Programmes distributed by BBC Enterprises)

Box 168 - Amnesty International, RFE

Boxes 207, 208 - BBC

#### HU OSA 301-0-2 Subject Files

Box 11: Radio

Box 12: Television

Box 13: UNESCO

Box 14: Miscellaneous, 1979 - 1985

#### HU OSA 301-0-2 Subject Files

Box 9 - Money; Opinion Pieces

### Peter Pallai Collection: HU OSA 375:

HU OSA 375-0-1: Interviews and Research Documentation on Soviet Influence, the Emergence of the One-Party System and the Events Preceding the Uprising in 1956 in Hungary

Box 1: Interview with Denis Healey, 1985

HU OSA 375-0-2: Documents on the Situation of Hungary during the Second World War and After from the BBC Written Archives and British Press Publications

Box 1: Central European Service: György Krassó at the Szepsi Csombor Circle, 1986; [Memories of György Urbán] / [Urbán György visszaemlékezése], 1990

Box 2: [Interviews with Adolf Pilch and Mieczysław Mlotek], 1982

