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“Please send us your money”:

*The BBC’s evolving relationship with charitable causes, fundraising
and humanitarian appeals.*

Suzanne Franks

The BBC has been involved with charitable fundraising since its earliest days. Indeed the promotion of worthwhile causes to the audience and the encouragement of charitable donations was seen as an explicit part of the early corporation’s relationship with its listeners.¹ The first ever radio appeal was aired on 17 February 1923, three months after broadcasting began in the UK. It was presented by Ian Hay who made an appeal on behalf of the Winter Distress League, a charity representing homeless veterans of the First World War, which duly raised £26 6s 6d in donations from the listeners. During these regular weekly appeals audiences were given comprehensive information about the merits of a particular cause and then asked to contribute funds, which would be passed on to the charity concerned.

Both the role and the overall scale of charities as Non-Governmental Organizations have developed and changed over the past century.² There has been a similar change and expansion in the way that charities have promoted themselves and raised funds from the public.³ As a result, although the weekly BBC radio appeal has remained a fixture in the schedules, the

¹ E.Colpus, 2011. The Week’s Good Cause: Mass Culture and Cultures of Philanthropy at the Inter-war BBC. *Twentieth Century British History*, 22(3), 305-329.

² K. O’Sullivan, 2014. ‘A “Global Nervous System”: The Rise and Rise of European Humanitarian NGOs, 1945-1985’. In: Frey, M.; Kunkel, S. & Unger, C.R. (eds.), *International Organizations and Development, 1945-1990*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 196-219.

³C.M.Walker and C. Pharoah, Charities Aid Foundation & National Council for Voluntary Organisations (Great Britain), 2002. *A lot of give: trends in charitable giving for the 21st century*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

corporation gradually became involved in a number of other ways of appealing over the airwaves on behalf of charitable causes. For example the regular high profile Christmas appeals for items which children could collect and donate, became a cornerstone of the popular BBC children's programme Blue Peter, raising huge amounts from its young audience each year.⁴

A further innovation in media-led appeals was the emergence of the fundraising telethon, which involved specially earmarked days where the whole broadcasting schedule for an evening was transformed into a fundraising platform, with a common theme. As this genre evolved, many of the events grew dramatically in scale and resulted in substantial amounts of money being raised through the programming. However as the nature of these activities and the partnerships involved became more controversial, especially during the 1980s, this led in turn to internal debates and anxieties about the role of a public broadcaster asking for money from the audience on behalf of 'good causes'. Given its public service remit, any kind of advertising or promotion was anathema to the corporation, so it has sought to guard carefully the use of what is effectively 'free' access to airtime by outside organizations. The way that this has been navigated with respect to charitable causes has become a subject of wide ranging but also nuanced debate, especially about the role of public service broadcasting in charitable fundraising for overseas humanitarian crises.

As fundraising has become more high profile and sophisticated in its use of media, the BBC has sometimes struggled with the way that this promotion of charitable causes can be meshed with the core missions of the organization, to inform, educate and entertain audiences. The

⁴ J. Seaton, 2015. *Pinkoes and Traitors. The BBC and the Nation 1974-87*. London: Profile.

internal debates, evident from the written archive material of the BBC, between the policy makers of the corporation, demonstrate the way that these issues have been confronted. And beyond this the wider public debate with the audience about how the BBC should position itself in relation to the world of charitable campaigning has led to a further evolution of policy in this area.

Regular Weekly Appeals

Soon after the first appeals were broadcast on BBC radio in the 1920s, a special committee was established to oversee the corporation on the question of choosing suitable charities, made up of experts from the charity world. This Central Appeals Advisory Committee was originally convened on 1st December 1927 and in recognition of its role, before the first appeal in 1928 there was a prior announcement that

...every appeal broadcast now and henceforth will have the added weight and importance due to the fact that it has been carefully considered by a body of men and women who know the whole field of charitable effect and are in a position to select the most worthy causes for a Sunday appeal week by week.⁵

The CAAC consisted of members of ‘the great and the good’ of the charity world – luminaries such as Brigadier General More of the United Service Fund, Lady Emmott President of the National Council of Women and Captain Ellis of the National Council of Social Service. The chair was Mr R.C. Norman of the Hospital Commission, who later became Chair of the BBC itself. This notion of careful consideration of worthy and reputable causes by a group of impartial experts and then using the appeal to give the listeners full information for them to make an informed decision, was embedded in the way the appeals

⁵ BBC Appeals, 2015. BBC Charity Appeals. [Online] Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/charityappeals/about/history> [Accessed 14th October 2015].

system was constructed. As one of the Christmas appeals noted: “You don’t often see the BBC hat in hand. We provide a stand for other people’s hats every Sunday just after the evening service and we’re glad to help all the good causes we can accommodate in this way. Our listeners are most generous people”.⁶

Audiences were indeed generous with donations and it became clear that appealing over the airwaves was a highly effective way of reaching a wide public. In 1928, the Daily Telegraph commented that “the power of the microphone to help charity was fully demonstrated in 1926, when more than £25,000 was subscribed as the result of broadcast appeals.”⁷ This represented at that time a quite significant sum of money, especially given the size of the audience at such an early stage of broadcasting history.

The same programme continues today using very much the same format and, though it has been renamed, the ‘Radio 4 Weekly Appeal’, it is still broadcast each Sunday, covering a wide range of charitable causes and finishing with details of how the audience can respond and make donations.⁸ Today the mechanism of donation is different because listeners can use the website, but the style and format of the programme remains much the same as it has been over the past 90 years: “a weekly programme highlighting the work of a particular charity and appealing for donations,” in which the presenters give their time without payment.⁹ In 2013 it raised £700,000 for the various charities, varying very much week by week, although by the standards of other broadcast fundraising this is a rather modest total.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Daily Telegraph, 28/01/1928

⁸ BBC Radio 4 2015

⁹ *ibid.*

Emergency Broadcasting Appeals outside the Schedule

It was in the early 1960s that a different type of appeal emerged, harnessed very much to the power of broadcasting in an era when the majority of the UK population now had access to television and radio. In 1963 there was a powerful Cyclone in Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) which caused widespread damage and suffering. The Ceylonese High Commissioner in London was interviewed by BBC News and quite unprompted he said that if the UK public wished to help the suffering in Ceylon they should send donations to the charity *War on Want*. This caused considerable upset both among competing charities and within the BBC because the High Commissioner had inadvertently used the news interview to give free publicity encouraging support of a single organization, which breached the rules about advertising and promotion.¹⁰ The concerns arose because in a strictly non-advertising environment where even identifying labels on products had to be blacked out in drama shows to avoid any suspicion of ‘endorsement’ the notion of giving ‘free on-air promotion’ for a single cause without proper clearance was seen as highly provocative.

The unforeseen intervention of the High Commissioner resulted in a hasty negotiation between the BBC and leading aid agencies of the period. Unsurprisingly there were complaints from other agencies about the prominence and ‘free advertising’ that had been given to *War on Want*.¹¹ As a result the broadcasters (BBC and ITV Independent Television, who were then the only two TV channels) came to an arrangement with the five leading

¹⁰ J. Benthall, 2010. *Disasters, relief and the media*. Wantage: Sean Kingston.

¹¹ A. Jones 2014. ‘The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and the Humanitarian Industry in Britain, 1963–85.’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 14(3), 264-285.

foreign aid NGOs of that period; *Save the Children, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Red Cross*, along with *War on Want* on establishing a joint framework to decide how they would manage the response to future humanitarian crises and make decisions on broadcasting special appeals. They went on to establish in 1963 a Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) of broadcasters and NGOs that would act as a forum where an NGO in response to a case of urgent need could request air time to interrupt the regular TV schedules and make an appeal. If the committee approved the request then the broadcast of usually around five minutes would be shown simultaneously on both television channels at a peak time in the evening and the proceeds collected would be shared among the five participating NGOs. In many ways it was a typically British compromise – a committee meeting in closed session that would mediate the request and subject to agreement from the broadcasters it would allow precious free airtime, providing the emergency cause was deemed sufficiently urgent and likely to harness sufficient popular support.¹²

The crucial innovation in this system was that the cause had to be deemed an ‘emergency’ which thereby merited interruption of the regular broadcast schedules to enable transmission at peak viewing time. It was also a system specifically designed to raise funds for overseas humanitarian crises which, largely due to the development of television and radio news reporting, were now something that domestic audiences were much more aware of than in a pre-broadcasting era.¹³ Once the broadcasters had agreed to transmit an appeal they would be

¹² Benthall 2010

¹³ Boltanski, L., 1999. *Distant suffering: morality, media, and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chouliaraki, L., 2006. *The spectatorship of suffering*. London; Los Angeles: SAGE.

responsible for the production of the usually around five minute slot, scripting, filming and editing it in consultation with the NGOs and usually organizing for a well-known figure to present the slot. The first appeal overseen by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) was for an earthquake in Turkey in 1966, which raised £560,000.

The establishment of the DEC caused some resentment to those NGOs which were left out as they were not amongst the five largest. Over the years a number of new members such as *Islamic Relief* and *ActionAid* have been admitted (and others such as *War on Want* have left) so that the current total who benefit from the emergency broadcast appeals is now thirteen.¹⁴ Interestingly the same model for emergency broadcast appeals in aid of humanitarian crises has since been adopted by a number of other countries, including Canada, Japan and some other European states.¹⁵ However even those NGOs which were inside the circle have experienced tensions with the broadcasters and in particular the BBC. On some occasions senior BBC staff have voiced frustration that the NGO members of the DEC. They have complained that “If the DEC say they want to do something there is an expectation the broadcasters will respond. It’s almost like a right to air time” with the implication that it was then awkward for broadcasters to refuse.¹⁶

¹⁴ DEC, 2015. Disasters Emergency Committee website. [Online] Available from: <http://www.dec.org.uk> [Accessed 28th October 2015].

¹⁵ Jones 2014

¹⁶ Sambrook, R., 2015. 'From Buerk to Ushahidi. Changes in TV Reporting of Humanitarian Crises.' In: Cottle, S. & Cooper, G. (eds.), *Humanitarianism, communications and change*. New York: Peter Lang, 56

Difficult Cases – Dilemmas for Broadcasters

As each request to respond to a crisis is made by one (or several) of the member NGOs, it is then considered by the full board of DEC trustees to make a judgment about its viability. On some occasions the BBC, after internal consultation, has then turned down the request from the DEC which has in turn usually led to public criticism, often mobilized by the NGOs involved. Senior BBC figures have raised concerns about a number of appeals. Several times this decision was taken on the grounds that ‘man-made political crises’ were outside the remit of the arrangement which was really suited to so-called ‘natural disasters.’ In one case a request for an appeal in 1982 arising from the civil war in El Salvador caused several weeks of arguing by the BBC Board of Governors and Board of Management on the basis that the appeals system should not be used to raise funds for what the Director of News referred to as “problems caused by man’s folly as opposed to natural disasters.”¹⁷ The Central Appeals Advisory Committee (as the BBC appointed experts in evaluating charitable causes) also became involved and opposed the idea of supporting such a cause. When the BBC Board of Governors eventually relented and did agree to show the appeal, the Chairman of the Governors wrote to the Chair of the CAAC admitting that the decision had been taken “after a great deal of agonizing.”¹⁸

Violence in the Middle East has in particular led to a number of arguments between the BBC and the DEC on the issue of ‘political crises’. In June 1982 the BBC after considerable internal wrangling turned down a request on behalf of victims of the Lebanese war, on the

¹⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre Board of Management Minute 234 22/2/1982

¹⁸ BBC WAC Emergency Appeals Case File 420-4-3 Letter from BBC Chair George Howard to Lewis Waddilove (Chair CAAC) 15/04/1982

grounds that “man-made disasters with political implications ... always fit uneasily into our rules.”¹⁹ However after public pressure and negative press articles the BBC changed its mind a few weeks later and allowed the appeal to go ahead. In 2009 during the Gaza war there was a similar controversy. On this occasion the BBC Director General was adamant that the issue, at the height of the fighting, was too sensitive and broadcasting an appeal would affect the BBC’s ability to impartially report the news of the conflict.²⁰ Despite considerable and sustained pressure the BBC Board and the DG held the line and refused to allow the DEC appeal to be broadcast. However some other UK channels, unlike the BBC, took a different line and went ahead with transmission of an appeal for Gaza.

In 1983 and subsequent years the DEC guidelines were redrafted to try and take account of the difficulties of dealing with ‘political’ conflicts, but there have continued to be internal debates when difficult cases arise.²¹ For example the appeal for Ebola victims in 2014 was a new departure for the DEC, as it had not previously raised funds in response to a specific disease. The other area that the rules were clarified was in respect to ‘emergencies’. On some occasions senior BBC figures had raised concerns about using a system for promoting emergency causes, when the humanitarian crisis under discussion was in fact something that had been evident for some time and could therefore not be considered as a sudden crisis

¹⁹ BBC WAC Emergency Appeals Case File 420-4-3 Internal memo from Appeals Secretary to BBC Director of Public Affairs

²⁰ Franks, S. & Seaton, J., 2009. Is Saving the World Journalism's Job? *British Journalism Review*, 20(2), 13-21.

²¹ BBC WAC Emergency Appeals Policy 1965-85 R78/2, 578/1. Revised DEC Handbook published in September 1983 includes section 10.1.15 on dealing with natural/political disasters.

(equivalent to an earthquake or typhoon). This is particularly evident in the case of famine which can rarely be classified as an ‘emergency’ as it will by definition have arisen over months or usually years.

On several occasions in the early 1980s concerns were voiced that raising funds to provide relief for victims of severe malnutrition or extreme food shortages was really something to be dealt with through the normal regular appeal system and could not qualify as a sudden unforeseen crisis. There were a series of debates internally on this problem, because although the BBC officials recognized the extreme humanitarian suffering a number of them including the Chairman Stuart Young felt that the emergency appeal system was being used inappropriately.²² Eventually in response to these debates the DEC rules were rewritten to incorporate a new category of chronic and creeping crises.²³ There has nevertheless been occasional questioning by the BBC about “whether it is appropriate” to break into the television schedule and “to present such an urgent message (to the audience) when the agencies have been aware that a famine has been building up for six months”.²⁴

²² *ibid.* See for example BBC appeals memos 25/06/1982 and 2/07/1984 which both address this issue of whether a request for a famine appeal warranted an emergency appeal or should be covered in the regular appeal framework.

²³ BBC WAC Emergency Appeals policy 1986-92 Case File 420-4-1 Memorandum 10/7/92 from DEC secretariat outlines the review taken that year and the inclusion of a new category of “non-sudden appeals ... where deteriorating conditions lead cumulatively to a life-threatening crisis of widespread proportions, calling for urgent aid from the international community”.

²⁴ Benthall 2010, 53

The scale of the funds raised in response to the Disaster Emergency Committee appeal broadcasts was in a different league from previous broadcast appeals. In many cases the sums raised extended to tens of million pounds, when the crisis was one which touched a popular nerve and brought a wide public response (the highest ever total was almost £400 million which was raised in support of the appeal for victims of the Asian tsunami in 2004). It was this much higher profile combined with the interruption of schedules which led to many of the internal and high level BBC debates about which crises should be supported and endorsed with a peak time broadcast.

However the role of broadcasting in charitable fundraising saw another substantial development in the mid-1980s, with the involvement of well-known celebrities and popular personalities. The DEC appeals had always used public figures to make the emergency appeals – actors, presenters, or even ballerinas in the case of Margot Fonteyn and the Nicaraguan earthquake appeal in 1972. But in the 1980s there was a very sudden and far greater involvement of contemporary popular culture into the whole field of charitable fundraising which had direct effects upon broadcasting.

New TV audiences for Fundraising

In July 1984 the DEC had launched an emergency appeal for a famine in Ethiopia. This was the third appeal for a famine in the Horn of Africa over the previous few years. The Ethiopia appeal by the DEC in July 1984 and after three months was about to be wound up having raised around £9 million. Then in October a follow-up BBC TV news report about the famine by the reporter Michael Buerk captured unprecedented widespread public attention.²⁵ A

²⁵ P. Harrison & R. Palmer, 1986. *News out of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid*. London: Shipman.

dramatic seven minute report made the top of all the UK news bulletins over two days. It was subsequently disseminated world-wide and shown on 425 different TV stations to an estimated half billion people – so that in a period long before the internet the piece effectively ‘went viral’. However the main reason why this footage has since gained iconic status is that it was the subsequent inspiration for the pop musician Bob Geldof to found *Band Aid* as a musical money-raising vehicle in aid of the famine victims he had seen on the BBC news report.²⁶

Geldof persuaded a group of fellow pop celebrities to devise and record a song entitled ‘Do They Know it’s Christmas?’ and the record was sold world-wide, the entire proceeds donated to support victims of the Ethiopian famine. Highlighting a charitable cause through a pop music song recording was an innovative concept and gained huge popular support. However it was clearly a fundraising mechanism, which depended upon the impact of television coverage. Geldof knew that crucial TV coverage of the new song was the key to raising money and sought to get coverage from the popular weekly TV show *Top of the Pops* which featured the leading top ten songs in the current music hit parade. However it was established procedure that the show only covered songs that were already in the hit parade and the Band Aid song ‘Do They Know it’s Christmas?’ had only been released so did not yet feature in the pop music charts. The BBC producer of the programme was not prepared to change the rules, even in the face of special pleading for an apparently worthwhile cause. However Geldof managed to secure the agreement of the BBC 1 Channel controller who agreed to clear the schedule for 5 minutes just prior to the Top of the Pops slot in order to broadcast the song with a special introduction by David Bowie – in effect this was a form of extra appeal.²⁷ The

²⁶ B. Geldof & P. Vallyely, 1986. *Is that it?* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

²⁷ S. Franks, 2013. *Reporting disasters: famine, aid, politics and the media*. London: Hurst.

result was that instead of raising a few hundred thousand pounds, the total income from the record was £8 million and shortly afterwards there were international spin-offs including the US version of the song, 'Feed the World'. But it was clear that the involvement of the BBC in a rather ad hoc fashion had ensured that the impact of the endeavour reached into a totally different league in terms of audience awareness and response.

The most significant longer term effect of the success of the *Band Aid* recording was the staging of a concert the next year which built upon the original song. The *Live Aid* concerts in London and Philadelphia in July 1985 were seen across the world and thanks to the television coverage became one of the biggest media events the world had ever seen, probably watched by around two billion people.²⁸ In due course they gave birth to a whole new genre of fundraising, inspiring charity events such as *Comic Relief* or *Sports Relief* where celebrities used the medium of specially crafted broadcast events to encourage support for a range of good causes. And it was clear from the start that a crucial element to the whole *Live Aid* operation was the central role of broadcasting and television in particular. The organizers planned a concert at Wembley Stadium and persuaded enough high profile artists to participate – including names such as Bowie, Elton John and Paul McCartney. However there was an awareness that the co-operation of the broadcasters and the way that the entire media event itself was constructed into what Dayan and Katz have labeled a “high holiday of mass

²⁸ J. Moran, J., 2013. *Armchair Nation: An intimate history of Britain in front of the TV*.

London: Profile Books.

communication” was the pivotal element in enabling *Live Aid* to reach out to an audience of not just thousands but millions.²⁹

The idea of staging a rock concert where the proceeds raised would be donated to a humanitarian good cause was not an entirely new idea. In 1963 Jeffrey Archer the future writer and Conservative MP persuaded the Beatles to perform a concert in aid of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.³⁰ And in 1971 one of the Beatles, George Harrison, was behind a ‘Concert for Bangladesh’ staged at Madison Square Gardens in New York in aid of Bengali refugees. According to Kofi Anan, later the Secretary General of the UN “George and his friends were pioneers” in staging this event. But the concert itself raised only modest amounts (initially well under a million dollars) for refugees in newly established Bangladesh.³¹

Both the impact and the financial total were negligible compared to *Live Aid* and one of the main reasons was that the involvement of broadcasting and a major television channel from the start in 1985 gave a whole new impetus to the venture; the BBC’s close involvement in the professional organization of the concert combined with the co-ordination in scheduling to

²⁹ D. Dayan & E. Katz, 1992. *Media events: the live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press. p1

³⁰ Beatles Bible, 1963. Live: Grafton Rooms, Liverpool. [Online] Available from: <http://www.beatlesbible.com/1963/06/12/live-grafton-rooms-liverpool-3/> [Accessed 30th October 2015].

³¹ The Concert for Bangladesh, 2015. [Online] Available from: <http://theconcertforbangladesh.com/theconcert/> [Accessed 30th October 2015].

reach a mass world-wide audience were crucial to its success. Originally the organizers of *Live Aid* had approached an independent television company to stage the event but after realizing they wanted a far bigger scale they approached BBC TV. There was not wholesale support in the corporation as some senior figures felt that the whole thing was too precarious and not sufficiently well planned given the tight time constraints of just a few weeks, but after further discussions they agreed to allow the BBC to participate.³² And it is this relationship which opens up questions about the appropriate role of broadcasters in supporting a particular cause. Once the BBC agreed to be involved it was no longer that they were simply filming and broadcasting a rock concert that someone else was devising. Instead the whole television operation was now based within BBC offices with staff involved at every stage in the organizing and management of the project. It was on a scale that no one had ever seen before. The BBC schedules for the day were cleared and an exception was made to allow the coverage (including live transmission from the Philadelphia event) to go on through the night. This was an era before 24 hour TV scheduling so it involved again some special negotiation and permissions.³³ And the results were unprecedented, raising over £100 million (\$150m) world-wide.

It was not only charity concerts by rock stars which had been tried before, but there had also been telethons previously on UK television, both on the BBC with for example the regular *Children in Need* broadcast, but also on the Independent Television network. Using Keith Tester's definition a telethon is a "lengthy television broadcast", which "asks the audience to support a specific charitable cause or to address a particular range of suffering and deprivation

³² M. Grade, 1999. *It seemed like a good idea at the time*. London: Macmillan.

³³ *ibid.*

by pledging donations by telephone or participation in specially organized events” it was the wholly unprecedented scale of the success of the *Live Aid* telethon in relation to earlier events which caused the BBC to reflect and debate its charity policy.³⁴

Celebrity Mediators

At this point in the 1980s there were few concerns raised about whether the BBC should be effectively promoting and masterminding a fundraising concert for a charitable cause, but those questions were to emerge in subsequent years. Instead in the aftermath of the *Live Aid* concert the BBC policy concerns were focused upon the whole new genre of what became seen as celebrity or even hipster fundraising and how this sat within the overall BBC policy on charitable appeals. In the year following the *Live Aid* concert a report was commissioned by the CAAC³⁵ () to investigate the impact and possible policy implications of this new form of broadcasting appeal and what implications it had for the corporation. The conclusions noted that the hitherto sober and worthy image of charitable giving had been almost overnight transformed into something that was now fashionable and appealed specifically to young adult and teen audiences who had never really been reached before. “Charity has moved from being worthy, boring and patronizing to being newsworthy and exciting ...”³⁶ Celebrity activism bred a whole new style of engaging with the audience and raising donations which

³⁴ K. Tester, 2001. *Compassion, Morality and the Media*. Buckingham: Open University Press. p116

³⁵ Central Appeals Advisory Committee, established in 1927 to oversee BBC appeals – see earlier mention, 3

³⁶ BBC WAC Central Appeals Advisory Committee Agenda and papers D34-4-6 paper on ‘Broadcast Appeals: Policy and Research Issues’ Presented 25/09/1986

brought a transformation in the world of charities.³⁷ It was clear that television promotion by the BBC had played a pivotal role in this process and this provoked some heart-searching debates amongst those responsible for charitable issues within the BBC. “In the new model, enticing programme content attracted audiences who were encouraged to give to a broad cause” rather than specific identifiable charities.³⁸

The CAAC report in 1986 expressed concern that this new image and style of charity would lead to wildly fluctuating levels of support year by year as fashions came and went. They noted that the new image of charities was encouraging “a new breed of floating givers with no stabled allegiances and little understanding of the requirements and achievements of the charities they have supported.” This was the heart of their concerns about the way that “the *Live Aid* phenomenon had simply sidestepped the whole vetting process”.³⁹ Hitherto BBC charity appeals policy had depended upon educating the audience about the details of a carefully selected cause and describing for audiences the charitable work it pursued, thereby enabling them on the basis of this authoritative information and guidance to make an informed decision about supporting and donating to a particular charity. It appeared that in this new post *Live Aid* landscape where the celebrity effectively performed a mediating role,

³⁷ I. Kapoor, 2013. *Celebrity humanitarianism: the ideology of global charity*. London: Routledge. Brockington, D., 2014. *Celebrity advocacy and international development*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

³⁸ Seaton 2015: p. 202

³⁹ *ibid.*

the effect was to take “a large part of the decision away from the donor; donors were required only to give and not to decide precisely to what or to whom to give.”⁴⁰

In the period since this original BBC report, which first raised such concerns about the implications of these fundraising broadcasting extravaganzas, a much wider academic literature has raised similar concerns, often about the depoliticisation of humanitarian crises which are framed through celebrity appeals.⁴¹ However already in 1986 there was a subtle understanding within the BBC about the implications of framing support for the appeal through the attraction of large TV audiences to celebrity figures. The central concern was that donors might be seduced by the appeal of the rock concert and the celebrity superstars and giving to a good cause would become a byproduct of this. Such uninformed and often uninterested donors were what concerned the CAAC. And subsequent research has indeed confirmed the point that audiences under these conditions are often not engaged with the cause, but are contributing simply because their favorite celebrity has endorsed the idea.

Kyriakidou’s research on audience discourses of distant suffering is interesting in this regard.⁴² In her work on audience engagement and the mediation of distant suffering, she

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ S. Cottle & D. Nolan, 2007. Global Humanitarianism and the changing aid-media field: Everyone was dying for footage. *Journalism Studies*, 8(6), pp. 862-878.

L. Chouliaraki, 2013. *The ironic spectator: solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁴² M. Kyriakidou, 2011. *Watching the Pain of Others: Audience Discourses of Distant Suffering in Greece*. Phd edn. London: London School of Economics.

conducted focus groups with TV audiences, to evaluate their response to charity telethon appeals. It emerged that in some cases the replies indicated that although audience members had watched the show and even donated to the cause, when asked to reflect upon it sometime later they could only remember the celebrity who had sung or presented the programme, but they could not recall which particular charitable cause the appeal was being staged for and to which they had indirectly given their money. Kyriakidou quotes some direct examples of this in interviews where participants were engaged with the media celebrity and had only the vaguest notion of the charitable purpose involved.

What was evident in the focus group discussions was that, the effectiveness of telethons to motivate the viewers aside, it was the telethon as a media event organised by and with celebrities that made a bigger impression on the viewers rather than the causes for which they felt the need to donate.⁴³

And she goes on to reach similar conclusions that were already being raised within the BBC in the 1980s, that “viewers attribute significance to their actions as a contribution to a media appeal and, in a way, a form of participation in a media event rather than as a form of action aimed at specific suffering others“.⁴⁴

Widening Effects

So it is clear that already in the 1980s there were voices within the BBC raising concerns about what was later defined as the assimilation of “modern humanitarianism to the media logic”.⁴⁵ But it was not only the concerns about the scale and implications of *Live Aid* which led to soul searching. *Live Aid* itself had in turn a remarkable effect upon the whole telethon ‘industry’. In addition to the weekly charity appeals the BBC had from its earliest days permitted within the system a ‘guaranteed’ annual appeal to certain major British charities.

⁴³ *ibid* p. 266

⁴⁴ *ibid* p. 271

⁴⁵ Cottle & Nolan 2007

One of these regular beneficiaries was the *Children in Need* appeal which the BBC had broadcast annually since 1927 when it first began as a five minute slot on Christmas Day. Since then the *Children in Need* appeal had gradually expanded and by 1980 it had become an annual telethon, where audiences pledged money (mainly by phone), in response to a range of special programming on a particular day, usually in late November, with the theme of raising funds for underprivileged children. Although the amounts raised had been gradually rising, in 1985 following on from the *Live Aid* broadcast in July, the *Children in Need* appeal saw a doubling of its annual total to reach £4.2million (around \$6m). The next year it doubled the total again and within three years it was raising over £20 million per annum.⁴⁶ The *Live Aid* effect appeared to have had wider long term implications for television fundraising beyond its own world-wide impact.

As a result the BBC Board of Management realizing that *Children in Need* had reached a wholly different scale of operation commissioned a further report on how that appeal should be handled in future. Two senior figures, Geoff Buck a finance director and John Wilkinson who oversaw public affairs, investigated the rapid rise of *Children in Need* and its implications for the broadcasters. They made recommendations for setting the appeal on to a more professional footing including for example with the establishment of a separate charity to manage the whole operation.⁴⁷ In the course of their report they noted with concern that “network programme initiatives, e.g. *Live Aid* and *Band Aid*, have called into question and in some cases contravened the BBC guidelines on appeals.”⁴⁸

In addition to the more practical problems of how to process vast amounts of money that were

⁴⁶ BBC Annual report and accounts 1987

⁴⁷ BBC WAC R78/2.633/1 ‘Report on *Children in Need* Appeal’ by Geoff Buck and John Wilkinson G180/86

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

now flowing into the BBC which Buck and Wilkinson had addressed, there were also wider issues that took rather longer for the corporation to digest. This was the fundamental problem of “how to maintain public service impartiality while being so intimately bound up in projecting and organizing what were essential campaigning events”.⁴⁹

The overwhelming success of *Live Aid* not only boosted the fundraising of established telethons such as *Children in Need*. It also led to a whole genre of programming in its wake which used and indeed was entirely dependent upon the television event to harness fundraising potential. Dayan and Katz have analyzed the way that *Live Aid* demonstrated that “the people can unite to save Africa from starvation... as a celebration of *voluntarism*” in the sense that audiences are inspired to join in to take “direct, spontaneous and ostensibly non-ideological action”.⁵⁰ This last point is very significant. As a range of other similar events emerged, starting with *Comic Relief*, there was little questioning that a public service broadcaster might be straying into territory that could be construed as campaigning. *Comic Relief* was launched from a refugee camp in Sudan on Christmas Day 1985 very much in the mode of *Live Aid*. It went on over the next decades to raise hundreds of millions of pounds from television audiences who watched the output and participated in the range of activities it spawned. Similar ventures followed in due course involving other celebrities and causes – such as *Sports Relief* which is a regular biennial event that originated in 2002 and is staged in co-operation with the BBC Sports department.

Charity Campaigning and the role of a Public Broadcaster

It was some years after this genre of televised event fundraising had become a familiar part of

⁴⁹ Seaton 2015: 203

⁵⁰ Dayan & Katz 1992: 21

the schedule that BBC policy makers started to raise questions of impartiality. In July 2005 Geldof resurrected a version of *Live Aid* to coincide with the G8 Gleneagles summit of world leaders which, in the wake of the Commission for Africa Report,⁵¹ was considering questions of debt relief and aid for sub-Saharan African countries. *Live 8*, as it was known, was again an international series of rock concerts, but this time the fundraising was through merchandise such as wristbands and record sales and there was an explicit campaigning message to put pressure on the governments meeting at the summit conference. At the climax of the concert the Irish rock star Bono appeared on stage holding up a box that he said contained millions of signatures that were going to be presented to the leaders at the summit meeting.⁵²

In 2004 Mark Ellen one of the TV presenters of the 1985 concert had reflected in a long article about the original *Live Aid* programme published in a music magazine, *The Word*, that it was a “venture that had begun as an event that the cameras had covered and finished as something staged by the BBC”.⁵³ This was equally apparent with the *Live 8* concert in 2005. Once again this was a sophisticated transmission operation linking concerts across the world into a television extravaganza which only a major broadcaster could have contemplated. The BBC found itself at the logistical heart of the operation as soon as it was broached, but again there seemed some confusion about whether it was staging the event and thereby endorsing the political message that entailed or whether it was simply facilitating television coverage of

⁵¹Commission for Africa, 2005. *Our common interest*. Available at

<http://www.commissionforafrica.info/2005-report> [Accessed 8th August 2016]

⁵² LIVE 8, 2005. Live 8 Concert. [Online] Available from: <http://www.live8live.com>

[Accessed 28th October 2015].

⁵³ M. Ellen, 2004. The Longest Day. *The Word*, November 2004 edition.

an event which others had devised and were responsible for. Later in the year the BBC Governors and Board of Management commissioned an investigation into the question of impartiality and balance in a changing broadcasting environment to consider such questions as the way that the BBC should approach these high profile events. The report was published two years later by the newly established BBC Trust and included the following caution:

The BBC has to be wary of campaigns. While it is easy to see that the BBC should not be involved with one-sided campaigns (against nuclear power, for instance, or to keep a local school open), it becomes harder when lobbyists' campaigns are humanitarian, or seem to be of universal appeal.⁵⁴

It went on to conclude that “we must not campaign or allow ourselves to be used to campaign... and we must ensure that our output does not embrace the agenda of any particular campaign group”.⁵⁵

Some months after this report there was a further controversy when the BBC became involved in events such as *Live Earth* and then *Planet Relief*. *Live Earth* was a series of concerts which had been planned in the wake of *Live 8* to focus attention upon climate change and the dangers facing the environment. The BBC transmitted the *Live Earth* concert in July 2007 and it was again a complicated and high profile operation, involving a hundred musicians performing at concerts across the world over a 24 hour period. The UK concert was at Wembley stadium with the US one at the Giants stadium in New York and there were similar

⁵⁴ BBC Trust, 2007. From Seesaw to Wagonwheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the Twenty First Century [Online]. Available from:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/safeguarding_impactuality.html [Accessed 25th October 2015].

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

concerts in Tokyo, Johannesburg, Rio, Shanghai etc. all staged in support of the *Alliance for Climate Protection*, under the chairmanship of the former US Vice President Al Gore.

In the wake of *Live Earth* another large scale event was planned by the BBC on the theme of climate change and safeguarding the environment. Once again it would have been a day of programming and events focused on these issues and like *Live 8* two years earlier its message was planned as raising awareness of a subject rather than specifically fundraising. Several celebrity figures including some highly popular comedians had been signed up already for the event and the working title for this day long follow-up broadcast, had been billed as *Planet Relief*. The project was scheduled for transmission in January 2008 and had been in development for 18 months when the BBC took a decision to scrap it in September 2007 on the grounds that it would compromise their impartiality to be involved in such a venture. It seemed that a line had now been drawn and that the limits of BBC involvement in ‘good causes’ were now being subject to greater scrutiny.

Unsurprisingly there were recriminations on both sides after the decision was taken to cancel *Planet Relief*. The head of TV news Peter Horrocks asserted after the decision was announced that “it is not the BBC's job to lead opinion or proselytize on this or any other subject” and his colleague Peter Barron editor of *Newsnight* speaking at the Edinburgh Festival that year claimed “it is absolutely not the BBC’s job to save the planet.”⁵⁶ Meanwhile several right of centre newspapers endorsed the decision to axe the programme and published articles hostile

⁵⁶ BBC News, 2007. BBC Switches off Climate Special. [Online] Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6979596.stm> [Accessed 25th October 2015].

to the idea that the BBC should be partial in the arguments about climate change.⁵⁷ This is an argument which has continued to smoulder. Several prominent right wing politicians and commentators, most notably the former UK Chancellor Lord Nigel Lawson, have voiced the opinion that the BBC should be neutral on the question whilst others have urged the corporation to take a stand on the arguments surrounding climate change.⁵⁸

Meanwhile in the wake of the *Planet Relief* controversy and cancellation, the environmental charities were critical of the BBC claiming that the decision “shows a real poverty of understanding among senior BBC executives about the gravity of the situation we face”.⁵⁹ In the official version of the decision there was no mention of considerations about impartiality. The BBC spokesperson claimed that audiences having seen the *Live Earth* concert now wanted more information and documentary programming about environmental issues which is why *Planet Relief* would not go ahead.⁶⁰ But against the backdrop of the debates and concerns about impartiality which had been taken seriously by both Board of Management and the new

⁵⁷ Waterhouse, K., 2007. Comic Relief is bad enough, but plans for an environmental Planet Relief are no joke. [Online] Available from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/columnists/article-478588/Comic-Relief-bad-plans-environmental-Planet-Relief-joke.html#ixzz3plfjX9vj> [Accessed 28th October 2015].

⁵⁸ Bell, A., 2014. The BBC is Failing to Deliver a Robust Debate on Climate Change [Online]. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2014/mar/26/bbc-failing-robust-debate-climate-change> [Accessed 25th October 2015].

⁵⁹ BBC News 2007

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

BBC Trust, there was little doubt that this played an important role in the outcome.⁶¹

Conclusion – Continuity and Change in BBC Appeals

Just as charities and NGOs have developed and changed over the past century, so has their relationship with broadcasting as a way of getting their message to an audience. Allied to this the philosophy and policies around the BBC's relationships with charitable appeals have shown huge shifts in the period since 1923. And as the BBC widened its scope from being a service heard by a select few into a mass broadcaster available to almost every citizen in the UK and many parts of the world beyond, so it became an increasingly powerful way of disseminating a charitable message. The advent of television was from the 1960s onwards increasingly significant in the communication of distant suffering and thus played an important role in galvanizing support for philanthropic causes, especially in the case of faraway humanitarian crises. (It may be that this also coincided with the period of de-colonialization when Western audiences were reframing their relationships with many developing nations.)

Meanwhile the BBC has had to find ways of navigating this changing landscape of charitable causes and audience engagement, ensuring that the outcomes were consistent with its purposes as a public service broadcaster funded by the UK license fee payers. This has at times led to tensions and difficulties within the corporation. On the one hand it is interesting to note that the BBC has continued with some of the same output and practices, so that there is still a programme based on similar lines to the one that originated in the 1920s. But in other areas and in response to rapid changes in practice of NGOs and the marketing of charitable causes, the BBC has had to work out how to make sure the output of large scale operations,

⁶¹ BBC Trust 2007

which often developed at speed, was consistent with its public service remit. The desire to embed philanthropic practices has and remains a core part of the BBC ethos.⁶² However the evolving relationship between broadcasting and NGOs which many have referred to as “TV and the cash nexus”⁶³ means that there is likely to be an ongoing tension in the way the BBC handles certain charitable appeals and events that arise from them.

Suzanne Franks,

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⁶² Seaton 2015

⁶³ Cooper, G., 2015. Give Us Your F***ing Money. A Critical Appraisal of TV and the Cash Nexus. In: Cottle, S. & Cooper, G. (eds.), *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*. New York: Peter Lang, 67.

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