I used the *Summary of World Broadcasts* (SWB) produced by the BBC Monitoring Service as a prime source for my work as current affairs producer, then presenter and reporter for the BBC World Service (English) throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. In my early years at Bush House, during the 1960s, I quickly became aware that all the correspondents and home-based current affairs specialist analysts used SWB as a prime source. If it was good enough for them.....!

Apart from supplying general background – or rather foreground – to events, I first used SWB intensively while making a BBC Radio 4 programme on the Khmer Rouge’s takeover of Cambodia. That was in the early 1970s. Press based coverage was thin bordering on non-existent. Journalists had not covered the fall of Phnom Penh and the way the Khmer Rouge drove the citizenry out of the city and into the countryside.

SWB provided reports of official bulletins, speeches, and sometimes statistics which allowed for a full-ish picture of those ghastly events. SWB was more than a “prime source”; it was in effect the only source.

I used SWB intensively during a four week TV shoot in the Soviet Union for *Newsnight* in May 1980. It provided a useful corrective to the official picture of the USSR, by reporting news from outer regions of the country that were unwittingly more honest about realities on the ground.

While preparing to cover the first ever “open” Party Congress in Moscow in 1986 preparatory reading in SWB of speeches by the new Party General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, made it wholly clear that here was a new kind of communist leader, speaking common sense, in everyday language. It was a very far cry indeed from the customary ideological rants. Something new was in the Soviet Union’s political air and the SWB picked it up.

It is worth recalling that the existence of the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s was identified by *The Guardian*’s “Kremlinologist”, Victor Zorza. He worked entirely from minute textual analysis of “official” Communist Party speeches and documents. It is a fair bet – though I cannot prove it – that many of these prime source texts came from SWB.
When preparing for a five week *Newsnight* filming trip in China in 1986, SWB reports revealed the full extent of the economic revolution in the countryside. When that “freeing up” might spread to the Chinese cities was a question to be answered only many years later. But evidence of change at the countryside-level was clear from the reports in SWB. They were an essential source.

More generally during the 60s and 70s, I was aware of the importance of BBC Monitoring as a news source by the frequency with which a news story, listing the sources on which it was based had “Monitoring” at the bottom of the page.

From 1986–1992, as Managing Director BBC External Services (MDXB) and later Managing Director World Service (MDWS), BBC Monitoring was part of my direct managerial and editorial responsibility. Funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s (FCO) grant-in-aid, we were fully responsible for its activities. There was never any doubt in my mind, nor in the way BBC Monitoring was treated, that it was an integral part of the BBC.

The crucial event in my experience occurred during the budget round in January of, I think, 1990. As he presented BBC Monitoring’s financial position and its budget bids, the General Manager, Eric Bowman, made frequent references to the fact that they were “tasked” to cover certain areas by either the Cabinet Office or the Ministry of Defence (MoD). There was no secret about this relationship. It was analogous to, though perhaps rather closer than, External Services’ relationship to the FCO’s “prescription” of language hours and services.

What struck me was the persistent use of the word “tasked”. It had in my book no connection with the vocabulary of journalism and broadcasting. Monitors were part of BBC journalism first and foremost. That was clear to me and it needed restating. We had a very robust discussion about this at the budget meeting.

Shortly after, I went down to Caversham and set out to the Monitoring staff that they were journalists, that their priorities were journalistic, that their principal role was as a source of news and news stories for Bush House but throughout the BBC too.

In saying this I was not challenging any part of the relationship with the Cabinet Office or MoD. All would be interested in a news story. How each party – BBC, Cabinet, Defence – interpreted and used that information was their own responsibility.

My recollection of the meeting is that while very many approved the overt recognition of their role as journalists, some remained uneasy, perhaps confused. Other close colleagues have recalled that there was general welcome for this strong affirmation of their role as journalists.

When Eric Bowman was promoted to a senior post in the BBC by Michael Checkland, we emphasised the changed emphasis of BBC Monitoring by appointing the distinguished radio producer Tom Read as General Manager. I call him a “great BBC humanist”. His appointment signalled the consolidation of the change.

To conclude, the activity of monitoring is an integral part of BBC journalism conducted according to accepted BBC standards. Monitoring sat easily within BBC WS broadcasting and journalism. BBCWS editorially was never compromised by Monitoring’s links with the Cabinet office or MoD.