

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

Psychoanalyzing America's Public Diplomacy, While Private Enterprise Exerts Itself ^[1]

Two public diplomacy initiatives have emerged; one from the Bush administration; the other from America's private sector. Together they suggest a subtle maturation taking root in U.S. efforts to connect with publics abroad, although change is never easy.

The new Bush administration initiative first surfaced briefly last January in a memo from Karen Hughes, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, transmitted to hundreds of U.S. embassies, consulates, and missions abroad. It was leaked to the press but largely was a media sleeper. In her memo to the field, Hughes sought to address some media relations issues expressed to her by U.S press attaches during earlier visits abroad.

A big problem was red tape. It would take too long to get policy clearances from Washington, which often delayed responses to local media inquiries. In her follow up memo, Hughes outlined a new procedure that would cut the embassies some slack in dealing with Washington. The memo also encouraged government spokespersons, among other things, to seize the initiative by "getting out front" of stories and speaking more on the record. While some foreign service officers wrote that the new rules were "empowering," and "liberating," others complained that Hughes was talking down to them and telling troops what they already knew about dealing with the press.

Secretary Hughes's communique got considerably more media attention nine months later when it was re-sent to the field with minor tweaks, the week before the November 7 off-year election. "Karen's Rules" were promptly leaked to the Washington Post, whose staff writer Elizabeth Williamson wrote that the memo was given to the newspaper "by a recipient who points out that if all were well, nobody would have leaked it." Williamson consulted several psychologists for their interpretation of Hughes's memo. Psychologist Robert Hogan called it "a good example of micromanagement.... Here she tries to provide rules for every imaginable case... a person won't be able to say anything." New York-based psychologist Martin Potas called the tone of Hughes's memo "condescending or first-grade-teacher-like."

Shortly after the Washington Post's psychoanalysis of Karen Hughes's memo, another document surfaced, this from private-sector media experts that would address the broad issue of articulating more effectively America's interests abroad through local media.

While not specifically comparing this document to Karen Hughes's directives on how to more effectively articulate the U.S. government's foreign policies through the media, the private sector initiative does address the broader issue of how to, in part, improve America's reputation through U.S. multi-national companies who "can deploy (their) considerable communications skills and public relations resources when working with the foreign media --

that critical group of journalists who shape impressions of America among audiences abroad." The idea here, of course, is to improve the environment for doing business abroad, but the broad objective of enhancing America's image abroad is the same.

The new 20-page "Foreign Media Relations Guide," which includes advice from what could accurately be called "The Master Class" of U.S. multinational corporate communicators, was sponsored by United Parcel Service, at the behest of the volunteer Business for Diplomatic Action. The BDA, a non-profit which includes the participation of noted volunteer public relations specialists and business leaders, is the brainchild of advertising executive Keith Reinhard, who seeks broadly "to improve America's standing in the world."

Now, if Karen Hughes were to be as blunt and honest with her State Department public affairs officers as the BDA is in its new media guide, the Washington Post would have Ms. Hughes institutionalized. The BDA says its soundings indicate that "...some American-based multinational companies do an excellent job of maintaining relationships with members of the media in all markets. Others get a failing grade."

The practical, no nonsense BDA Media Guide cuts to the quick and gets down to doing better business abroad, or else. Some examples:

"As a company with a strong global presence, it is essential for us to show the foreign media not only the UPS they know at home, but our company's operations on a global scale." -- Ken Sternad, VP Public Relations, UPS.

"In each of the 119 countries where we operate, McDonald's has a strong local identity. Our franchises, vendors, managers and employees are all locals and they are our spokespeople." -- Jack Daly, Senior Vice President, Corporate Relations, McDonalds.

"Think 'local' then 'global' when developing your pitch -- not the other way around." -- Perry Yeatman, VP, Global PR, Kraft

"Providing foreign-based reporters and editors with the opportunity to talk with your top company leaders... you will build important relationships and help ensure well-informed coverage of your company." -- Matt Pilla, Group Manager, Worldwide PR, Microsoft.

And finally this from the private sector document, which goes to an apparently sensitive issue Karen Hughes has raised.

"Too often, responses are slow or I am told the CEO is too busy to talk to me. This attitude has colored the tone of my reporting." -- Journalist from major Chinese daily newspaper.

Karen Hughes might consider sending this document abroad, with its sound advice to buttress her points.

Alvin Snyder is one of several volunteer BDA Senior Advisors, but was not involved in the

Foreign Media Relations Guide project.

*A pdf of the BDA's Guide is available at no cost on BDA's [Web site](#), or by clicking [here](#)
. Hard copies are available for purchase in bundles of 25 at halk@linemark.com.*
