

Nov 04, 2016 by [Craig Hayden](#)

Reading Between the Lines ^[1]

The New York Times published an interview with the United States Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, Karen Hughes, on August 28, 2007. The interview was conducted by Robert McMahon of the Council on Foreign Relations and can be [found here](#).

McMahon posed some relatively straightforward, if not overly provocative questions, for the Undersecretary. In this blog post I take a critical look at her responses. It is not my aim to simply reject her statements -- but I do think it is important to look at the implications of her policy rhetoric.

Hughes's appointment as the steward of U.S. public diplomacy was heralded as a significant elevation of its importance in the Bush administration back in 2005. More recently, after last year's critical Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on U.S. public diplomacy efforts, it is more common now to find public discussion of public diplomacy in the U.S. skewed towards either a rejection of administration overtures which are seen as simply posturing, or, that U.S. public diplomacy is effectively on hiatus until the next administration. Do Hughes' statements prove otherwise?

First, Hughes is asked whether there is a way to improve the U.S. image, given the recent global public polls showing low views of the United States in light of the Guantanamo detention facility and the war in Iraq.

Hughes responds with what has become one of her signature arguments about public diplomacy: it takes a long time. In the interview, she calls it a "generational task" and notes that opinion of the United States reflects a "complex tapestry" of influence. In other words, what people believe about the United States is not just what the United States says or does, but what others may be saying or doing. That public diplomacy is a long-term task is certainly true -- especially if you consider the objectives. But to lead with this response sounds somewhat like a deflection, rather than an answer. It defrays the very real fact that U.S. public diplomacy -- whether it is international broadcasting or cultural exchange programs (to name a few) compete with wildly unpopular foreign policies that largely overshadow post-hoc justifications and peripheral routes to persuasion embodied in exchange programs.

Hughes also states that the United States does not receive credit for its support of a Palestinian state. However, U.S. dedication to resolving the Palestinian crisis has effectively been on hold as part of the "Road Map" Middle East policy -- which requires a stable Palestinian state to move forward. As such, the Arab media haven't exactly framed U.S. dedication to the Palestinian cause in favorable terms.

The Undersecretary is also asked about the purpose of state-sponsored media such as Al-Hurra television and Radio Sawa -- which take up a considerable chunk of the U.S. public diplomacy budget. She responds by claiming that it is important that "we offer credible news and information about America and our policies and our values across the world." She then

emphasizes the institutional “firewalls” between the federal government and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) that oversees U.S. international broadcasting. First, I’m not sure there have been any studies of this, but I’m pretty sure the BBG and the federal government aren’t seen as distinctly separate by their target audiences in the Middle East. Such perceptions might significantly undermine the persuasive impact of the BBG’s programming among viewers. Second, the recent politicization of Al-Hurra (symbolized by the departure of Larry Register as its manager) doesn’t reinforce its status as an “independent” venue for international broadcasting about the U.S government. March Lynch has a great summary of this latest development.

Hughes is then pressed to say more about the reality of a “firewall” separating the BBG from U.S. government interests, especially since it was suggested that its programs should carry “newsworthy events” endorsed by U.S. agencies. She responds by stating that it was fine for other agencies to suggest programming, especially if such programming could offer venues that provide a “platform for debate for democracy advocates.” For her, the firewall is there to “protect our journalists.” I’m not exactly sure that it is protecting anything. The Undersecretary starts to respond by suggesting “... if our taxpayers are funding communication vehicles...” Yes, if our taxpayers are funding communication vehicles then they need to be sufficiently justified and, dare I say, show some connection to the long-term objectives of positive opinion cultivation. I am not so sure the “firewall” remains a significant justification for the existence of these programs -- when there are other more compelling arguments.

The Undersecretary is also asked about how some veteran diplomats have criticized the use of radio stations like Radio Sawa and Radio Farda, music-oriented stations that also include a section of news programming. The most responsive answer she provides is: “I think it’s important, particularly at a time when there is a great deal of choice in the environment, that we offer a program that’s listened to.” It’s worth repeating here the anecdotal observations often cited in analysis of these outlets, that when the news comes on these stations, its listeners change the channel. Perhaps an alert reader of this blog can provide some clarification.

Hughes is then asked about Edward R. Murrow’s advice to integrate public diplomacy into the “take offs” rather than “crash landings” of foreign policy planning. She responds by saying public diplomacy is more integrated into policy planning now since when the USIA was folded into the State Department. I think it is fair to note that it has been a few years since the 9/11 Commission issued its recommendations on revamping public diplomacy. Hughes leads off her response by saying that she is on Secretary of State Rice’s agenda twice a day, which to me is not indicative of the centrality of public diplomacy to foreign policy planning. Perhaps I would be more comforted if, say, we were told that she and Secretary Rice were briefing the White House on a regular basis.

The issue of “rapid response” -- a defining phrase for her approach to public diplomacy -- is put forth for further comment. The Undersecretary notes that she has streamlined the process by which Ambassadors can comment on events, which previously required approval from Washington. This kind of flexibility is indeed an accomplishment. It also rightly recognizes that Foreign Service Officers all carry some of the public diplomacy responsibilities in their job. But the term “rapid response” also captures the agility required by U.S. government to deal with and react to the flows of news content circulating in the international press, in online outlets like blogs, and in the foreign regional press. Such attention to the media environment is smart public relations -- but is it too “reactive” at the expense of making considered arguments and

influencing the international media agenda?

More to the point -- how proactive can the U.S. be if, according to the Undersecretary, it has "two full-time Arabic speakers now in Dubai whose job it is to get on Arab media and explain America's policies and values and communicate our position on issues of importance to the Middle East?" Touting two bloggers hardly represents a serious institutional devotion to public diplomacy.

A quick search of the Undersecretary's speeches will reveal that a host of small initiatives have been implemented since she took the position. Most significant, perhaps, is her overarching emphasis on getting Foreign Service Officers and Ambassadors in front of foreign media outlets. Yet the incremental nature of what has been done seems to indicate that public diplomacy is still not central to the business of U.S. foreign policy.

In many respects, this post joins the chorus of public diplomacy critics with yet another litany of complaints. But my purpose is to do more than to add another polemic. I argue that the string of Hughes's appearances and interviews gloss over the work yet to be done in U.S. public diplomacy, and more generally deflect policy criticism. Simply put, there doesn't seem to be a well-elaborated justificatory vision or logic for public diplomacy -- other than declaring that it is "important" and that it can help promote democracy or provide "credible coverage of the U.S." Nor does there appear to be any substantive argument that would indicate a serious ascendance for public diplomacy as a policy tool.

This is not to say that important work isn't being done on Karen Hughes's watch. Under her leadership, the State department began exploring how online chat-rooms can be used as a site for dialogue between U.S. government representatives and foreign publics. The efforts started out as small at first, but they are growing. Wikis, virtual consulates, and even a presence in the online world of Second Life are being used as new venues to reach populations who already consume media that negatively frame the United States. The rise of e-diplomacy is an important, proactive step in the right direction and should be encouraged.

Despite these developments -- they will obviously be overshadowed by the looming impact of the rest of the Bush administration's policy. These policies (and the attitudes they convey) have spawned a host of enduring narratives in the Arab press, which cultivate a taken-for-granted characterization of the United States. They represent an entrenched negative perspective that shapes how audiences interpret what the United States says and does. Dealing with this will ultimately require more than just more public diplomacy or a more "rapid" response. The baseline assumptions of "common sense" about the United States in foreign media have changed. This means that public diplomacy really is now a generational commitment. Also, it likely means that a significant re-alignment in how U.S. foreign policy is justified (let alone enacted) is necessary.

Again, the policy rhetoric is telling. When Karen Hughes describes how she argued for more financial support for public diplomacy this year before Congress, she says: "For the first time ever this year I made the argument that public diplomacy was a national security priority." As 2008 approaches, the fact that such a statement still needs to be made reflects the sobering reality of public diplomacy in the U.S. foreign policy imagination.
