

Nov 04, 2016 by *Adam Clayton Powell, III*

Priority for Karen Hughes: Get Reporters out of Baghdad ^[1]

As Karen Hughes begins to settle into her new office, she must see that one priority for U.S. public diplomacy is to get reporters out of Baghdad.

No, not get reporters out of Iraq: Just get them out of their bureaus in the capital.

The consensus of U.S. journalists in Baghdad is that it is just too dangerous to get out into the countryside, where they could report on what is happening - good and bad. But reporting what is happening - good and bad - should provide the world with a more complete picture of what the U.S. is doing in Iraq. So it should be a goal of American policy.

Right now, the most memorable pictures from around the country come from video cameramen embedded with (or members of) the insurgency, showing bombings, beheadings and other anti-U.S. attacks of the day. The insurgents have grasped the power of the photograph, while U.S. media have largely abandoned the field, because it is too dangerous

And that danger is real, cannot be ignored and must be addressed. It has been the subject of frequent dispatches over the summer, from stories by reporters including Joe Cochrane of *Newsweek* to the angry memo from Hannah Allam, Knight Ridder's Baghdad bureau chief - promptly reprinted in Jim Romenesko's widely read column - about the danger even of going to the store to buy bottled water.

"The main obstacle we face is the severe limitation on our movement and our ability to get out and report," said Mike Silverman, managing editor of the Associated Press, in an interview with the *New York Times*. "It's very confining for our staff to go into Baghdad and have to spend most of their time on the fifth floor of the Palestine Hotel."

That concern was the starting point for a review of Iraq coverage by the Associated Press Managing Editors board. The APME discussion was especially important because of the power of the Associated Press: Much less familiar to the public than TV networks or national magazines, the AP, with a Baghdad staff of more than 70, is the most widely used source of Iraq coverage for newspapers and broadcasters, local and national, in the U.S. and in much of the world.

"Some editors expressed concern," wrote reporter Katharine Seelye in the *New York Times*, "that a kind of bunker mentality was preventing reporters in Iraq from getting out and explaining the bigger picture beyond the daily death tolls."

One member of the AP board expressing concern was Rosemary Goudreau, editorial page editor of the *Tampa Tribune*. Following the meeting she wrote a lengthy column describing the AP meeting. She also discussed the divergence of journalists' daily reporting from accounts

brought back by relatives of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have served in the military and in civilian jobs in Iraq, and she quoted one of her fellow editors in the AP meeting.

"Troops coming home are telling their friends - they're saying there's progress being made that we're not reporting," said George Stanley, managing editor of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, according to Boudreau.

Which brings us back to Karen Hughes.

One of the priorities for public diplomacy is to get reporters out of the Palestine Hotel press center and into the field, so that they will report on what is happening around the country and that go beyond what journalists call the "bang bang" of the day.

One way to get reporters into the field safely is to have them embedded with military units. But fewer and fewer reporters are willing to become embeds, and now there are "about three dozen," according to Silverman, down from 700 two years ago. One reason: journalists' distrust of the military (shades of Vietnam). Another: money. Insurance alone costs \$25,000 for "a short stay," Boudreau writes.

But for Karen Hughes, this is a familiar problem: She certainly knows the power of getting out into the country - in her case, with candidate George Bush. She just needs to harness some of the same journalistic and competitive incentives - and some of the same logistics - to get reporters out on the road. News organizations will spend the money if they feel it's necessary to stay competitive.

One start: Every time Secretary of State Rice, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld or another government VIP travels to Iraq, the major press and photo opportunities should be as far away as possible from Baghdad's barricaded Green Zone. Instead, put the VIP in a crowd of students at newly refurbished school in the northeast part of the country - and limit access to that one stop. That way the world's press will have to show what is happening there, if only because of the competitive pressure to get the photos (and remarks) by the visiting VIP. Then leverage exclusives the way you do every day in Washington: If "60 Minutes" or "Prime Time Live" wants an interview with the Vice President, fine: but only in a photogenic location in Mosul, not in a sterile studio in Baghdad or Washington.

Yes, this means careful planning - just like any Presidential trip. And this means organizing secure transportation, with only short notice for Baghdad reporters. That's long standing practice, too, for White House correspondents.

Of course, those are only for the highest-profile media events: In between, every day, a more complete picture needs to be conveyed. And that picture needs to go to local television stations and to local newspapers in town after town - not just to CBS and the Washington Post. That again is long-standing practice at the White House, where catering to local media has been honed to a fine art in both Republican and Democratic administrations.

The military has already devised a tool to do just that: the "virtual embed." Arranged by Lt. Col. David Farlow, deputy director of public affairs at Central Command, journalists around the U.S. can get telephone access to military personnel on assignment in Iraq. That way they can learn first-hand what is happening around the country, where Baghdad-based reporters are not traveling. Because American soldiers in Iraq can now be dialed using U.S. area codes,

there is not even a charge for an international telephone call.

That's a start, but television needs pictures. For TV, the "virtual embed" program should use video satellite phones, with the service member in Iraq actually moving the camera to show the rebuilding projects that U.S. taxpayers are funding. The video embed program could begin with what is almost a cliché: linking service members in the field with TV anchors in their home towns. You can even do it live: Early morning in the U.S. is late afternoon in Iraq.

And who knows: The flow of "virtual embed" stories on the air and in print might also act as another incentive for journalists to get out of the Palestine Hotel, to get out as real embeds, to file on-scene reports. It might even catch on: Remember, the most popular feature, by far, of the CBS Evening News at its audience peak was On the Road, with Charles Kuralt.

Some might argue this is just propaganda, not journalism or public diplomacy. They're wrong: it is an antidote to the anti-U.S. propaganda by the insurgents, propaganda which now goes unanswered because journalists are not able to see for themselves. Sending journalists to respond to propaganda is especially effective public diplomacy. Think of VOA (and CBS and NBC) using journalists to rebut fascist propaganda in World War II.

The difference today is that the fascists are targeting democracy's reporters, to keep them from covering the news.

Archived Comments:

Robert A. Berger on August 26, 2005 @ 10:15 am:

Adam Clayton Powell III wants the press to publish the truth about what's happening in Iraq, in particular regarding the rebuilding of Iraq. He wants reporters to escape the tenuous safety of the fifth floor of Baghdad's Palestine Hotel and find out what's happening in the country at large. That whole story is being missed, he suspects, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld emphatically agrees with him.

And it's true: As things are, many reporters, incapacitated by the most dreadful of conditions, aren't getting out in the countryside to report for themselves. Insurgents have so monopolized the story on the ground that little the U.S. mission is accomplishing gets noticed anywhere, Powell says. It is said that many people serving in Iraq are, out of frustration, passing back home the information that "the good news" is just not getting out. Powell is reaching for a way to get the reporting job done.

But what a transparently inappropriate way he has come up with: a system so subject to Pentagon and government manipulation that it's nearly impossible to imagine that truth would be served.

His system: iron-sided, one-stop photo-ops of the government's choosing a show-and-tell, he suggests, at a refurbished schoolhouse in the northeast of the country. The Pentagon would trundle the press corps in hardest-sided protection to the authorized spot of the day, on the pretense that that small spot would tell the greater story of the repair bombed out nation.

Please. Have we learned so little from the informational manipulation the American public has suffered in recent years? Can we be that gullible? The Pentagon knows what we need to know and will feed it to us as we need to know it?

Credit Powell with being among those who recognize that we can't go on failing to collect and distribute truthful information about the rebuilding of Iraq. At least he's willing to make a suggestion for breaking through the comparative blackout, and he's right to force the issue. But Powell, and journalists, need to do far better than his proposal. America needs independent information and judgments, not cooked-up photo-ops, not sly "stay the path" messages from those who led us to war.

It is a bracing responsibility of journalism to break through and do better and, in fact, some are working on the problem.

But in the meantime, E.L Bernays, R.I.P.

---Robert A. Berger

Adam Powell on August 26, 2005 @ 10:59 am:

Bob

You are arguing for journalism and I'm arguing for public diplomacy. It's not the same thing.

Journalism is only *part* of public diplomacy. Public relations plays and has always played a large and distinguished role.

PR is an essential and integral part of the USC Public Diplomacy program. On this web site, it is central to much if not most of John Brown's Public Diplomacy Press Review and Al Snyder's WorldCasting column.

Journalists including the AP's managing editor concede journalism has failed to go out to report and find the truth. So the US needs to step up its PR. (The insurgents have great PR. Why leave the field to them?)

And there is a precedent: The US military transported journalists all over Viet Nam. And that didn't exactly produce uniformly pro-military coverage.

Finally, I would note that the USC journalism school teaches and offers degrees in, yes, public relations. Maybe they even study E.L Bernays.

Cheers

Adam

robert a. berger on August 26, 2005 @ 3:31 pm:

Adam,

Of course I'm talking journalism: You've devised one of the most pernicious schemes for the misuse of journalism on a grand scale I've ever heard of. Several things need to be accomplished here, and preservation of an honest journalistic function is one of them.

You, meanwhile, are talking public diplomacy. Is that somehow on a plane above journalism? Consult the Constitution.

In fact, whatever the merits of public diplomacy, some of it is supposed to be walled off from the American people to avoid having the American government propagandize its own people. You, though, would stuff the information channels with Pentagon-inspired information unabashedly.

Sure, propose ways to help public diplomacy counter the consequences in the region of insurgent violence in Iraq. But don't make the press subject to Rumsfeld's manipulations in the process and pretend we'd be improving Americans' ability to get at the truth of the rebuilding effort.

The truth in this circumstance, of the post-war status of Iraq and the rebuilding effort, is proving hard to get at. No one can scorn your concern over that. But don't poison the press in the process.

The truth is not served by making government the source of truth. The press has been led around by the nose plenty of times over the years, to its great embarrassment. Let's solve the problem of coverage in Iraq without repeating that mistake.

---Bob Berger

Adam Powell on August 27, 2005 @ 7:10 pm:
Bob,

Thanks for a terrific discussion! I look forward to continuing it in person at next week's forum.

First, public diplomacy: The U.S. has "unilaterally disarmed" on the field of public diplomacy (and PR), according to the Djerejian report [<http://bakerinstitute.org/Pubs/Miscellaneous/Peace.pdf>], among others. Now we know U.S. journalists have unilaterally disarmed, too, as they are the first to admit. I'm not willing to continue disarming U.S. public diplomacy and American journalism just because I don't always agree with Donald Rumsfeld (which I certainly don't!). Remember, this advice was addressed to Karen Hughes, not Bill Keller; for him I'd have other advice, which would be about journalism - and which also centers on getting reporters out of the newsroom and into the U.S. I've run national news organizations, and I know how easy it is for all too many reporters to file from their office or bureau instead of going out to find out what's happening.

Second, journalism: If you think this advice was pernicious, check out coverage of any political campaign, or the White House. It's all about getting out Washington and onto the campaign trail, where reporters can see, depict and maybe even talk to people outside of New York, Washington and L.A. All I'm arguing is for more reporting outside of Baghdad - which isn't happening now, as everyone concedes. More reporting is better reporting, right? I'm not afraid of what journalists may find if they leave the cocoon of the Palestine Hotel and the Green Zone. Maybe they'll find it's better, maybe they'll find it's worse, or maybe they'll find it's "better and worse," as USC's Middle East resident Gordon Robison put it. Right now from reading the papers we just don't know, as reporters in Iraq are the first to concede. So I'm eager to see more reporting, and I know you are, too.

Third, the real divide: The next star reporter is going to be whoever actually goes out into the field and reports this war. But it seems no one wants to be the new Ernie Pyle, even if it means fame and fortune. To find out why, I suspect we might have to consider the class divide, which neither left nor right will confront and which is more powerful than any ideology, separating today's journalists from our volunteer army - and what they do for a living. And *that* is a story no one wants to write.

Cheers
Adam
