

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Breaching the Firewall ^[1]

U.S. government international communicators shifted into max overdrive from both sides of that protective "firewall," to report on what may become known as one of the great White House public diplomacy efforts ever: President Obama's June 4 address from Cairo, Egypt to the Middle East and beyond. The speech was unquestionably both a news event and a public diplomacy activity, so there are times when the mythical "firewall," to protect the independence of government international journalistic endeavors, may be ethically breached. This was one of them.

From the State Department, where there is an Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy, the speech was carried live via the Department's website www.america.gov and translated into 13 languages. Over on the other side of the firewall, where U.S. communicators are shielded from public diplomacy and those who could influence content, the U.S. government Middle East satellite TV news operation, *Alhurra*, asked viewers in a special three hour evening program to offer their thoughts in advance about President Obama's remarks via e-mails and a Facebook page and the channel conducted an online polling in Arabic and English to gauge real-time reactions which showed that the "Arab World reacted favorably" to the speech. Also from the public diplomacy-protected side of the firewall, in its run-up to the President's speech, the Voice of America interacted with its audience via e-mail, Twitter, YouTube and myVOA.com. VOA correspondents asked Muslims around the world how the United States could improve relations and compiled video clips online of audience expectations for Mr. Obama's Cairo speech. The VOA streamed the President's speech live on TV, radio and online in English with post-speech analysis and live feeds from Cairo, Jerusalem, London and Kabul.

I'm not suggesting there was anything wrong with this, and all of it looked thoroughly professional as sidebars to the central news story of the President's speech, and news entities did it all on their own, although it could have easily been part of someone's public diplomacy plan just the same. So the lines between news and public diplomacy can be legitimately blurred, and overall, the White House must be beaming. It worked well for everyone.

A week before all this, the White House announced its "new Global Engagement Directorate (to) leverage diplomacy, communications, (and) international development...". Many of us were uncertain whether this meant "public" diplomacy, as the word "public" was omitted from the White House statement, so one could not be certain that the White House intended to coordinate public diplomacy efforts from there. So I called over to the White House Press Office where I once worked, to ask whether it would be fair to conclude that "Public Diplomacy" is part of the Global Engagement Directorate's shopping cart. I was asked to send an e-mail which I did, but I never heard back.

I think the answer came loud and clear from Cairo.
