

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

More History on a Murrow Obsession ^[1]

Edward R. Murrow's famous remark about the importance of "the last three feet" to bridge personal contact was not unexpectedly raised at last week's conference that I attended at George Washington University, on the 50th anniversary of the Nixon-Krushchev "Kitchen Debate" at the 1959 U.S. Exhibition in Moscow. But few may know that Murrow raised the last few feet issue informally, and more than once, with colleagues at CBS News in New York long before he uttered them as director of the U.S. Information Agency.

In the late 1950s, when I was a news writer at CBS News, and several years before Murrow entered government service, he would joke that we at the network could get a radio signal to New York from one of our foreign correspondents stationed "just about anywhere in the world," but sometimes "can't get the signal down the hall" to the broadcast studio (CBS's Studio Nine, on the 17th floor of 485 Madison Avenue) and out on the air. This was before satellites, of course, and our radio signals often would be passed through several relay points before getting to us in New York, and technical glitches were not unknown. In those days (oh, here I go), we would communicate abroad via cables to set up our broadcast reports with our overseas news bureaus, and to place orders for technical facilities, so things were quite clumsy and primitive by today's standards with cell phones and the Internet and satellites.

Murrow clearly had the "last three feet" as part of his mindset, as he strived to reach that single individual in his reports, so maybe he was only half-joking when he would lament that some CBS news pieces did not make air because they could not be made to travel those last few feet down the hall in our building.

I venture that we were more certain about the content of our news reports that we placed on our primitive communication chain back then than some who craft the public diplomacy messages today, which are Twittered about at will, even though in the olden days we too often failed to get our news messages to travel the last three feet down the hall and out of the building.
