

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Bad Press on Karen Hughes' Middle East Listening Trip May Be Premature ^[1]

While State Department official Karen Hughes was wrapping up her listening tour of the Middle East, an important session of United Nations representatives was taking place in Geneva.

Ms. Hughes, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, was assessing how the United States government might better communicate with Arabs and Muslims abroad. The U.N. meeting was tackling the issue of how much authority the United States ought to have in overseeing world information that would help the United States do so.

The large entourage of reporters who accompanied Secretary Hughes critiqued her every move in perfect harmony: one of many students she met with in Egypt lectured her on U.S. swagger and arrogance; a feminist in Turkey berated the United States for not understanding Middle East traditions; a woman in Saudi Arabia told Ms. Hughes it was unimportant that Saudi women were not permitted to drive because she has a driver. The image conveyed here was that Secretary Hughes, President Bush's long-time friend and confidant, was unprepared for what she encountered on her first trip to the Middle East, that she was rejected at every turn.

According to John Brown, who monitors media for the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy, there were few "kind words" for Karen Hughes, "either from the left or right."

But it remains to be seen what Karen Hughes will do with what she has learned, and that is probably quite a lot. There is precedent for someone close to a president to have a major impact on the way America communicates its policy objectives abroad.

The last such person was Charles Z. Wick, a former director of the U.S. Information Agency and long-time friend of Ronald Reagan. As the director of the USIA's Television and Film Service for eight years, I accompanied director Wick on most of his overseas trips where international broadcasting was on the agenda. Communication opportunities observed abroad would be assessed upon return to Washington, and often implemented. The long lines we observed stretching for blocks into a video rental store in Amman, Jordan would lead to a worldwide video rental club at U.S. embassies; a remark by the mayor of West Berlin at lunch would lead to a new U.S.-West German TV station in the heart of communist East Germany; a secret meeting with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's deputy during a summit session in Iceland would help to alleviate the Soviets' jamming of the Voice of America.

So we really don't know what's in Karen Hughes' head, following her survey trip to the Middle East, and those who characterize her as a Texas bumpkin out of her league in Middle East

foreign policy may well be proven wrong.

And now for the United Nations meeting that was held in Geneva while Karen Hughes was holding hers in the Middle East. The Geneva session has a very real tie-in with Karen Hughes' agenda far away, in terms of improving U.S. communications in the Middle East.

The central question at the Geneva session was: who owns the Internet, without question one of the world's great communication tools.

Some may not realize it, but there is a current owner of the Internet, and it is the United States of America. But others, including the United Nations, want to take it over. The European Union, which participated in the Geneva session with the United States and the United Nations, insists that the private sector should be involved as an owner of the Internet, on grounds that, reports Associated Press Business Writer Aoife White, "the Internet is a global resource. The EU...is very firm on this position."

He continues, "At issue is who would have ultimate authority over the Internet's master directories, which tell Web browsers and e-mail programs how to direct traffic.... That role has historically gone to the United States, which created the Internet as a Pentagon project and funded much of its early development."

And guess what? The U.S. government has some of the most popular sites on the Internet. Overall, U.S. government sites are No. 6 in popularity in the world!

According to Nielsen Net Ratings, the most popular federal site is the U.S. Department of Commerce, which, by the way, oversees the Internet for the U.S. government. The most popular site within the Commerce Department is the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a valuable resource for hurricane information, and the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology where you can set the right time, to the fraction of a second, on your desktop or notebook.

The second most popular U.S. federal site is Health and Human Services, including the National Library of Medicine, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Federal Drug Administration, and Medicare & Medicaid.

In third place is the U.S. Treasury, primarily the Internal Revenue Service (no surprise there).

The fourth most popular federal site is the Interior Department (Parks and Geological Survey), and in fifth place, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Nielsen Net Ratings tells Worldcasting that the U.S. government federal broadcasting services, including the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Alhurra TV, and the others, are not rated by Nielsen because they "fall below the reporting cutoff," meaning their Internet ratings are too low for inclusion.

Now, one can assume that Karen Hughes, ripped on her trip to the Middle East by writers from the left and the right, is looking beyond this to next month's World Summit on the Information Society to be held in Tunisia, where America's ownership of the Internet will be argued.

Instead of reading her press clips, the secretary may be looking instead into the feasibility of

presenting the most popular Internet sites in the world in Arabic, on the American-owned and operated Internet.
