

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Predictions for 2006 in Public Diplomacy ^[1]

It is relatively clear to me where U.S. public diplomacy is headed in 2006. And so there's really no reason to wait until late December, or New Year's day, to make predictions about the coming new year.

Therefore, I will submit my predictions now, and take my chances.

One. Al-Jazeera, the renegade Arabic satellite channel, will continue to drive the agenda of U.S. public diplomacy. It plays the offense, the U.S. the defense. But the defense will begin to score some points after January 1. Both will be looking back over their shoulders as the BBC shapes up its Arabic language TV channel, scheduled for launch in 2007.

Two: Al-Jazeera will, in fact, be in the White House's face more than ever next year. This prediction is a sure thing, because the channel is already in the face of the White House, literally. Its new English language service has moved into its Washington, DC, studios on 16th Street, just a few blocks from the White House. Employees of each will see one another at the same restaurants at lunch time, where al-Jazeera will no doubt be on TV monitors, with its English language reports from up the street and from other anchor locations in London, Doha, and Kuala Lumpur, starting this spring. The U.S. government's channel, Alhurra, is not carried in English, only in Arabic, and is not available in the U.S. Go figure.

Three: The Bush administration will scramble to find talking heads – the kind one sees on U.S. cable news channels and Sunday morning interview shows. That's because the producers of al-Jazeera's English language satellite channel will have lots of time to fill, 24/7, and will be looking for talking heads to fill that time, especially from Washington. The White House and the State Department's public diplomacy chief, Karen Hughes, ought to start thinking about this soon, to provide ample time for media training of the most articulate and attractive spokespersons.

Four: The U.S. will react to al-Jazeera's new thrust into the U.S. - if it stays on schedule - by moving to repeal the Smith-Mundt Act. Since the end of World War II, Smith-Mundt has banned the domestic dissemination of U.S. government non-military international broadcasts. It was enacted when memories of Nazi propaganda foisted on the German people were still fresh. With al-Jazeera English seen in America, Congress will conclude that Smith-Mundt is out-of-date. Its repeal would free up Alhurra and other U.S. government programs to be seen in America.

Five: America's public diplomacy will become less of a mess - as some characterize it - if Karen Hughes stays put throughout 2006 as the State Department's communications czarina. Although she is but one of nine members of the Broadcasting Board of Governors who oversee the American government's international broadcast services, she will use her clout as confidant of President Bush to make public diplomacy more proactive. Her boss, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, has said that more will be expected of the U.S. government's

international broadcasters. Karen Hughes can be expected to be the catalyst.

Six: Non-government organizations (NGOs), will do more than just talk about what to do about U.S. public diplomacy. NGOs will start to do something themselves. The Foundation for International Understanding will forge its first TV co-production partnership between American and overseas counterparts to improve U.S. communications with Muslim societies. And this will be just for starters from the private sector.

Seven: Public opinion polls will continue to be funded by Middle East TV channels themselves, confirming their own popularity. But totally independent TV audience surveys will be conducted as well in 2006. One such media poll, I predict, will be conducted in cafes and university lunch rooms throughout the Middle East, to determine which of the satellite news channels are getting the most “buzz.” Another will determine which of the news channels are the most reliable among ALL viewers, not only those who watch the channel funding the poll. Yet another survey will show audience SHARE (the percentage of viewers that each station receives in head-to-head competition) for Middle East satellite news channels.

Eight: Suggestions will continue to be made that America’s Alhurra satellite channel ought to be turned into a C-SPAN for the Middle East, showcasing U.S. democracy at work in the congress and elsewhere, at the state and local levels. But again, al-Jazeera got there first. It recently started to broadcast a C-SPAN-type channel that carries Middle East parliaments in session wall-to-wall and Middle East town hall meetings.

Nine: With all of its varied channels, al-Jazeera will be doing its share in 2006 to showcase democracy spreading across the Middle East. Its previous extensive coverage of the continuing Iraqi electoral process, and extraordinary in-depth treatment of the UN report on Syria’s complicity in the murder of the former prime minister of Lebanon, were landmark broadcasts for the Middle East. Look for more such coverage about the changing Middle East on al-Jazeera in 2006, particularly coverage that displays the democratic process.

Ten: Al-Jazeera will go public. It continues to extend its brand beyond its Arab and English language news channels with its version of C-SPAN, and its sports and educational channels. With few sponsors to help pay the freight, even the Emir of Qatar, al-Jazeera’s founder and benefactor, can run out of gas. And he is positioning his brand for that eventuality.

Yes, most predictions about U.S. public diplomacy involve al-Jazeera. But that’s because it will continue to drive the public diplomacy agenda in 2006, while the U.S.A. and others play catch-up.
