

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Will Karen Hughes Observe the ‘Ted Turner’ Rule? ^[1]

Let’s pause for a moment to reflect on trends in U.S. public diplomacy during the almost two months that this column has been offered here: what we have seen are developments that confirm what we can call the Ted Turner rule.

If I interpret the founder of CNN correctly, he believes that the people who provide the editorial content for satellite TV news broadcasts – the producers, the writers and reporters, the anchors, the photographers, the designers of beautiful graphics that enhance stories visually, the Dan Rathers – all are something like short order cooks flipping pancakes onto a plate. Then there are others who deliver the pancakes.

Let me explain.

In the early 1980s, when I headed U.S. Information Agency TV, Ted Turner had a problem with his fledgling international commercial news service. Three of us -- Charles Z. Wick, then Director of USIA; Henry Hocheimer, my deputy; and me -- went to see Turner at CNN’s Atlanta headquarters to eyeball the situation and hear him out.

On the lawn outside Turner’s office was a satellite dish, receiving a signal direct from Soviet TV in Moscow. The Moscow feed was taped at CNN 24 hours a day, and newsworthy clips were excerpted and played on CNN’s news programs. But the international telecom organization, INTELSAT, was demanding a service charge of several thousand dollars per hour to receive the signal, even though Turner was already receiving it on his own, for free.

We were able to help out as a way to enhance East-West dialogue. But what came through most vividly from that encounter was Turner’s hour-long-plus virtuoso performance, during which, among other things, he elaborated on his theory of pancakes and delivery.

“CNN just puts programs out there,” explained Turner, “and somebody else takes over and delivers them. I don’t even think about it. I just want to make the world a better place.”

He said his job was to pay attention to crafting CNN’s message, and to help save the world during the Cold War. Turner said he believed the audience would grow because he was saying something important that they would want to know. That’s Turner’s rule, he said, the reason he said he started CNN International - oh, and also to make lots of money, he added.

Well, Turner’s rule is alive and well today in Washington - not the money part, but the rest of it - as we review what’s been happening in U.S. broadcast public diplomacy over the past few months.

We now know that Karen Hughes, the accomplished former White House Director of Communications and President Bush’s confidant from Texas, will become the third

Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. But think back: Ted Turner had a vision of what he wanted, and he put his arms around a CNN product to get him there.

Today, the U.S. public diplomacy effort is still striving to find its legs. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said as much last week, when she told a Congressional budget committee that public diplomacy would be restructured “in ways to make it more effective” in informing people abroad. She also suggested that we can expect more involvement by the State Department in the news content of the U.S. government-sponsored Arabic language broadcast services, Radio Sawa and TV Alhurra. She said they were making progress, but that “more would be expected of them.”

And according to unconfirmed reports along the same lines, the State Department has enlisted the aid of a Washington think tank to recommend ways to reshape the broadcasting services, because they believe some of the staff are insufficiently sensitive to U.S. foreign policy objectives. So we can expect more fiddling with the message, and the likelihood of renewed turf battles to come

Now for the part about serving up those pancakes: Following Ted Turner’s rule, delivery of the message will go forward despite all the squabbling in Washington. That’s because of the technicians, many under contract in the private sector, who are able to get the messages out effectively just about every day.

Last week Alhurra and Radio Sawa announced they now have significant audiences in Syria, where people feel the services are “reliable,” according to surveys by the A.C. Nielsen company. And by this fall, because engineers some time ago made powerful satellites available over Europe, Alhurra and Sawa will become available to millions of Muslims there.

More applications of Turner’s rule last week: reports from Asia and Europe of new cell phones capable of receiving TV signals from space and mobile hand sets that can record satellite television programs. These hand-held devices will even work from cars and other moving vehicles, and they will “eventually record video for lengthy periods.” Digital signals will reach people on the go, lots of young people, many of them making things happen on the ground in their countries.

All of this suggests that Alhurra and Sawa soon will have viewers and listeners all over the place -- in trains, in cars, or on the go anywhere -- in countries where the U.S. especially craves public support, countries including Syria, Iran, and yes, even North Korea.

The best thing the State Department can do is to keep its hands off those broadcast channels and let the professionals who are running things there do their job. Heavy-handed attempts to enforce sensitivity to U.S. policy (translation: propaganda) have only undercut U.S. credibility when it was tried in the past. It took the U.S. government almost four years to get these new operations on the air, and there are finally some pancakes to deliver.

If the government will allow U.S. worldcasters to provide a consistent, quality product that provides news consumers can use, engineering wizards will continue to find ways to get the message to the marketplace - and audiences will follow.

It must be true. Ted Turner said so.
