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Journalists Are Shocked, Shocked to Find Government Videos on Local TV Newscasts

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Journalists are shocked, shocked to find government videos on local TV newscasts; Karen Hughes, meet Mike McCurry.

There are two big public diplomacy stories this week that are at odds with each other.

One is that the U.S. government has failed miserably in getting its story out to the world, that's why people hate us, and Karen Hughes is the only one who can save the day.

The other is that the U.S. is actually pretty slick about getting its message out, especially on television, from the most distant reaches of our planet to the smallest TV stations in the U.S. However, because the U.S. government is only capable of spreading propaganda, it must be stopped.

So which is it?

Karen Hughes is the White House designee as the next Department of State undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, an act widely depicted by media pundits as an all-out effort to communicate U.S. policies more effectively. The second major story was suddenly elevated because the New York Times featured it in a lengthy page one article on March 13, entitled "Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged TV News." That report is now being recycled in stories all over the world as a tribute to the effectiveness of the U.S. government propaganda machine.

The New York Times article claims that fake news is being pumped out by the State Department and other government agencies as video news releases (VNRs) that are not always properly identified as coming from the U.S. government, which the Times views as a tainted source. Dozens of local stations around the U.S. use these videos in their newscasts in a way that suggests the reports are products of the stations' news departments, not free handouts from the government -- or from corporations or advocacy groups, which have used handout videos for decades in their PR campaigns.

And even before TV was invented, newspapers have been doing the same thing, printing handouts from government agencies, corporations and activist groups as news, labeling them as "special to" the newspaper - implying, just as TV stations do, that their own newsrooms produced the reports.

One VNR about aviation security was run on a Kansas City TV station, reported the NY Times, and another State Department video was said to have been carried on a Memphis TV station, a Fox affiliate, "on how assistance from the United States was helping to liberate the

women of Afghanistan.” That station’s news reporter who aired the segment, which came in from one of the station’s syndicated news services, said she was “shocked” to learn from the Times that the State Department had provided the video, and had she known this, she would not have run it.

The New York Times exposé followed action by Senate Democrats a month earlier, who introduced a bill that would “stop taxpayer funded government propaganda.” Section one of the Senate bill states that “This Act may be cited as the ‘Stop Government Propaganda Act.’” The Federal Communications Commission has also been asked to intervene. (To be fair to all media, will the Senators also want a federal law to ban written press releases?)

While citing widespread government fakery of news stories by the Bush administration, the Times pointedly singled out the State Department’s Office of Broadcasting Services as being the leader of the pack.

“With close supervision from the White House,” reported the Times, “the unit began producing narrated feature reports, many of them promoting American achievements in Afghanistan and Iraq and reinforcing the administration’s rationales for the invasions. These reports were then widely distributed in the United States and around the world for use by local television stations. In all, the State Department has produced 59 such segments.”

But as it turns out, despite the New York Times story referring only to “the past four years,” this practice was not invented by the Bush administration: On Thursday, at a National Press Club panel discussion, former Los Angeles Times Washington bureau chief Jack Nelson asked President Clinton’s press secretary, Mike McCurry, whether he would ever have condoned using VNRs. McCurry said not only would he have condoned it: the Clinton administration had used them, and as often as possible. McCurry’s reason: the media only report negative news about government, he said, and the Clinton White House wanted a way to get the good news to television viewers around the country. If TV stations used these VNRs and misidentified them as coming from their own newsrooms, added McCurry, then that’s the media’s ethical lapse and not the fault of the administration.

That was not the answer Jack Nelson or the other journalists at the Press Club expected to hear from the former spokesman for the Clinton White House.

By coincidence, well before the New York Times story, I had contacted Greg Franklin, who heads State’s Office of Broadcasting Services, to gather background for later column here. His description of his agency’s work provides an explanation of how government-produced video is routinely picked up by news organizations, which repackage and refeed the reports to television networks and stations around the world - including in the U.S.

Franklin began by apologizing for not getting back to me sooner, explaining that he had been up most of the night helping to produce and broadcast President Bush’s State of the Union address in eight languages for television audiences around the world.

He said things had to be started pretty much from scratch in 1999 with a few thousand dollars and virtually no TV production capability, after the White House and Congress had dismantled the old U.S. Information Agency. Greg Franklin was one of several of my former colleagues from USIA, where I headed the television operation, who had been transferred to State, and together with professionals already in place there, they started to rebuild the U.S. government

television service, before and after 9/11.

"We are still trying to operate much bigger than we are," said Franklin. "We have built an all-digital facility that we are just now training to put into service. We produce live coverage of foreign affairs events and also bring in feeds from a number of sources."

Franklin said these reports are fed live to worldwide syndication services including Associated Press TV News, Reuters TV, the Armed Forces Radio and TV Service, and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) Eurovision service, which covers the Americas, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Pacific Rim.

The State Department's live syndicated feed also goes to the Al Jazeera Arabic-language channel, to the U.S. Arabic-language channel Alhurra, and to the Voice of America, and tapes are provided to international news bureaus in Washington. The State Department also makes live satellite interviews with policymakers available to TV stations in the U.S. and abroad, where anchors can ask whatever questions they want.

And here is another way U.S. information - what some insist is propaganda - finds its way to Memphis and Duluth and Bora Bora.

"We produce TV feature stories and B-roll (videotape pictures) with sound bites from policy makers," Franklin explained. "These are distributed the same as our live coverage and also placed on NewsMarket.com, an Internet-based TV News Feature service subscribed to by TV news broadcasters worldwide. We get several hundred placements a week from that site. 40% domestic, 60% international. We also program the AETN - American Embassy TV Network, 8 hours daily, five days per week," where people can come in and see the television programs for themselves.

When anywhere along this journalistic food chain someone "forgets" to label free video handouts as something other than their own work, the unlabeled PR footage then feeds onto the global video news stream undistinguished from the work of local newsrooms.

The State Department also does co-productions with TV newsrooms in other countries, plus an innovation called TV Exchanges, said Franklin, "where TV reporters from several Middle East, Indonesian, African and Central Asian TV stations are participating in a program to do life in the U.S. stories through their own eyes, and they exchange the stories with each other. These have real traction, and I am trying to propose more funding."

Then Franklin, a career government worker with no political agenda, who had been up all night producing the President's State of the Union speech in eight languages, courteously excused himself.

"I need some sleep," he concluded.

So it seems to me that Karen Hughes might be able to hit the ground running over at State, unless an Act of Congress, with the help of the New York Times, gets in her way.
