TRANSCRIPT OF EDITORIAL FIREWALL SESSION – THURSDAY, MAY 17, 2018

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**SPRINGER:** Let me give you a little background about why we’re doing this. After Amanda Bennett came in as the VOA Director, some situations came up where she wasn’t sure, at least in VOA’s case, who’s protected by the firewall, what constitutes a firewall violation, who might commit a firewall violation, so she asked a group of us last September to get together, about six or seven of us, and we met for about a month to review the existing firewall policy and to make the changes that we thought were necessary. So we did that, and what we re-wrote went to Amanda and to the General Counsel’s office, who all signed off on it. At the end of last year, just before Christmas break, I had sent that out to the house as a Word document and included it in the Best Practices Guide. But the other part of this is that Amanda wanted these kinds of sessions so that it wouldn’t be just words on a page, that you could come and we could talk about different scenarios and go through what a firewall violation might actually be.

So what’s going to follow, and what you have in your handouts, are a little bit of history and a little bit of background, which I will go through, and in the back of your handouts you have four scenarios – one of which is real, three of which are hypotheticals which our group put together. What you don’t have are the solutions to those scenarios, and hopefully that’s where the discussion will come from when you see what the scenarios are and we try and work through them.

So, the whole idea of a firewall is not exclusive to us as a federal agency; the firewall has existed in the private sector and commercial news for decades. Before I came to VOA I was with CNN for 23 years, and my last two years there, I was in their Standards department. And the whole idea is that the business side, truly the business side of a news organization, and we’re talking about revenues, sponsors, advertising, commercials – all of that – the business side does not, and should not, tell the news side what to cover, how to cover it, how to write a story.

The example I can give you on that is that when I was in the Standards department, during that time, Ford Motors was one of the biggest sponsors of CNN. It was the kind of thing where, you know, you go to commercial, “Larry King Live, brought to you by Ford Motors,” and you get the big full-screen graphic. But at that time our investigative unit was working on a multi-part series about engines in Ford trucks and SUVs that were exploding for no reason. Now, at no time were we told myself, legal, the reporter and producer, were we ever told or heard anything from the business side saying, “Ford’s upset with that, you can’t do it, you shouldn’t do it, let us know what you’re doing.” None of that was relayed to us. In fact, we don’t even know if Ford contacted us but the whole idea that the business side would never tell us, “You can’t do that.”

Now here, clearly we don’t have commercials, sponsors, advertising, so for us, the business function is the doing of public diplomacy. What the State Department does, what Congress does, and what the White House does. And by the same token, none of them, no one in government, should be telling us how to write our stories, what kind of stories to cover, how to slant them, and that’s our firewall. And for all intents and purposes, the firewall, from the very beginning, is law. Because it starts with the charter. The charter basically says “We will be accurate, objective, comprehensive. We will be balanced. We will present the policies of the U.S. clearly and effectively and present responsible discussions and opinions.” That’s what any news organization does. So the charter is basically saying right from the start, “You’re a news organization and you need to do your work as a news organization.” So that’s set down in law from the very beginning.

In 1994 when Congress passed the US International Broadcasting Act, which essentially created the BBG and IBB, they did not exist before 1994. A couple of the key points here in Section A: US International Broadcasting shall be consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the US. What that didn’t mean in 1994 and what it doesn’t mean now is that we’re supposed to be cheerleaders or spokespeople for US foreign policy objectives. Being consistent means that we report on those policies as we do as any news organization does, but not that we support those policies. We will present all sides of those particular policies.

**Audience**: So, what happens when we are supposed to be covering, let’s say, Venezuela, and the whole coverage of our newscast is Venezuela? Is that, are we, actually being biased?

**Springer**: If you’re not presenting the government’s side, regardless of how anyone in the Spanish service may feel about the policies of that government, if you’re not presenting the government’s side, you run the risk of being a little bit unbalanced in your reporting. But, the firewall only has to do with the U.S. government, and that’s not necessarily, what you’re talking about is not necessarily a firewall violation. To me that’s more of an editorial issue. The idea of presenting all sides of a story, and in this case, presenting the government’s side, would be necessary so that you’re not accused of being biased or one-sided in your reporting. I realize that the government probably feels that way no matter what we do, but it’s our responsibility to present the whole picture as clearly as possible. So getting back to this, if you notice item 5 says that “international broadcasting shall be conducted with the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism.” Clearly, again, they’re recognizing that we’re supposed to do our work even though we’re a federal agency, we need to do our work like any professional news organization. If you notice down at the bottom on broadcasting principles, it repeats all the key phrases of the Charter: reliable, authoritative, accurate, objective, comprehensive, and balanced. So, they acknowledged here what we need to do.

When President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act before he left office, there are a couple of points here that are of interest to us. The professional independence of the broadcasters, secretary of state, and the CEO shall respect the professional integrity and intdependence of the Board, the broadcasting service, and the grantees. So once again, Congress is saying, “You need to be an independent news organization.” If you look at this highlighted piece about the Inspector General, the reason we included this is because when an Inspector General goes into any federal agency, their job is to review how that agency operates as a federal agency. In other words, how they handle their funding, making sure that if money is scheduled to be used for one project, it’s not all of the sudden being diverted to another project. How it handles its human resources, its personal issues, but what the inspector general doesn’t do, and shouldn’t do, is review the daily output. The daily work of that agency. And what happened a few years ago, is the Inspector General came in to VOA, and in its report, the Inspector General was critical of our journalism. So when the report came back to the building, both VOA and BBG took a good look at that and went back to State, and said “That’s not the Inspector General’s job. The inspector general does not review our output, our work.” So if you notice, at bottom of this highlighted area, it says, “Inspector General may not evaluate the philosophical or political perspectives reflected in the content of the broadcast.” So again, Congress is saying, “State Department, you have to stay an arm’s length away from VOA when it comes to their journalism. You cannot comment or criticize in any way, shape, or form on their journalism.” Protecting us, once again, as a news organization.

When the National Defense Authorization Act was passed and published, the House and Senate put together its conference report. And its conference report is essentially background information to help make people understand a little bit more about what went into the bill. And if you notice, it says here that the legislation prevents the broadcasting entities from being merged into State where the credibility and journalistic integrity of the broadcasters would be threatened. Now, your example just now of Venezuela, or anything that happens, you know, in Africa, or any of our language services. Our credibility and our integrity is called into question one way or another probably every single day in every country and every region that we go into. But if VOA was moved into State Department, that would just make it that much worse because then we would definitely be criticized as being a tool and a spokesperson for the government. So that’s another reason why we stay separate and that we’re an independent agency in that regard.

**Audience**: Two scenarios: So, last year in September, myself and my colleague, Shaka, we went to four different countries, and the first country was Congo. When we arrived in Congo, I didn’t know the background, I didn’t know I was supposed to, like, meet up with these people from State Department and people walking at the embassy. They put the Chief of Mission, and some media personal people. They wanted us to sort of, like, brief them on what we were going to talk about with the President Kabila. We eventually learned we ended up meeting Kabila but we didn’t do the interview why because as we were setting up for the interview, Nikki Haley, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, the United Nations was giving a speech about Kabila, and calling out Kabila. So Kabila looks at the screen, he says, “Look, why should I give you an interview when your UN ambassador is here criticizing me? So what’s the point of talking to Voice of America?” But fast forward, the embassy people wanted to tag along with us. Which my colleague Shaka said no, absolutely not. And they wanted to know the contents of the interview. So, that’s one scenario. Then, we go to Zambia, we ran into some issues as we were getting visas at the Zambian embassy in Washington, DC, one of the embassy staff pulled out a camera and started chit-chatting like we are having a conversation right now. She was recording, and then the moment we left, she sent out a report, in Zambia, he asked Shaka a simple question. Shaka said “you know what? I’m not going to talk about the politics of whatever,” but he sort of gave a general example. And once we landed, before we even landed in Zambia, it was headline news that VOA journalist Shaka Ssali endorses the government in Zambia. So we get there, all these embassy people are looking for us, left and right, we had to go to the embassy, they said “before you do anything else,” that we needed to go and debrief the embassy people. So did we cross the line? Did they cross the line?

**Springer**: In the first example, it’s unfortunate President Kabila felt like, “Alright, why should I talk to VOA because of what Nikki Haley is saying?” The answer to him would have been, even though VOA is a government agency, we are an independent news organization, and our business is to present all sides of the story, so we’d like to get your side of the story, we’d like to interview you so that we can inform our audience. That would have been the way to handle that.

**Audience**: We did, Shaka pushed back on that, the reason we had to tell your side of the story. But then the guy just went off and…yeah.

**Springer**: Sometimes, I mean, it’s unfortunate, clearly it’s unfortunate that the timing happened that her UN speech was happening the same time you were there. You did the right thing, Shaka did the right thing. It’s up to them whether or not they want to do the interview. I don’t think beyond that there would’ve been anything you could’ve done.

The second example I was actually involved in on this end because it had to do with the whole process of our outside request group, which involves myself, and Drew in the General Counsel’s office and Bridget in PR, and I’m not going to go into details here but we wound up discussing that by email with Shaka. When that person took out his camera that was unfortunate. That was not a firewall violation on your part, I mean, you know, it was an innocent conversation. It shouldn’t have been recorded like that, it’s possible that either one of you could’ve said, “Hey, do me a favor, please not record this” because of what eventually happened. The fact that there’s this big headline saying “VOA endorses the government.” That was a problem. That’s not a firewall violation, that was just a bad set of circumstances that came together. So, in both cases, you weren’t wrong in anything that you did, it’s just that certain circumstances out of your control contributed to these two incidents happening the way they did.

**Audience**: Quick question, regarding, you know, the cameras. When somebody is asking their staff to record from their side, you know, they’re a legislator or anybody, and they put a recorder of whatever kind, is that okay? Are we supposed to allow that?

**Springer**: Yeah, there’s actually something in the best practices guide about subjects taping interviews that we’re doing. They can do that, but they need to be told that their recording can only be used for private viewing. It can’t be put on YouTube, it can’t be put on their websites. If they want to wait to see what we publish, and they want a link to that from their websites, that’s fine. But if they’re recording it just for their own purposes, it can’t be made public. That’s…and in case anyone ever asks, that’s a news industry standard. That’s not something that VOA has made up just for the heck of it. That’s news industry standard.

**Audience**: Can we just go back to the example of…the Zambian example? Would you have called the embassy on their behalf? How did you follow up on that?

**Springer**: I have to go back and look in my emails because I think we might have contacted the embassy but I have to double check. I just remember the fact that the firestorm that hit internally when that happened, so I need to go back and check and see how we handled that externally with the embassy, but I’ll let you know.

**Audience**: But if in that case, then we contact you, and then you take it a step further….

**Springer**: Yeah, but of course, in that regard, that created something that was out of our control that we didn’t expect to happen. And Shaka explained that he didn’t expect that he was going to be recorded on the record in a conversation that was supposed to just happen within the confines of where they were standing and talking. So, you know, we did do a little bit of footwork on that, but I can’t remember how we finally resolved it with the embassy, so I would have to go back and look at my emails and remind myself of that.

So, just to get back to this, about the conference report, and I’ll get through this very quickly, the conference report, if you notice, somewhere in the top middle it says, “The news gathering and reporting functions of the broadcaster must continue to be independent and objective.” If you notice a little farther down it says again all the key phrases of the Charter: reliable, authoritative, accurate, objective, comprehensive. Now, this last paragraph, “This credibility would be at risk if the broadcast services were placed inside State,” again, “where they could be perceived by foreign audiences being mere adjuncts of the department, and where they would be subject to the daily pressures of diplomacy.” That’s the key point in that sentence. It’s basically saying that VOA should not be part of the business, the doing of public diplomacy, and if we were inside State Department, there would be too much pressure on us, because they would be over us, rather than us being independent from them. So again, Congress is recognizing that there needs to be this separation in us doing our work.

All of this background leads to the Best Practices Guide. This is the lead graph in the guide’s section on the firewall, and it’s very simple, and it’s very specific. The firewall is violated whenever another US government agency or US government official tries to influence our work by putting undue pressure on a VOA journalist or on the agency itself or takes any other action that may undermine the journalistic credibility or independence of VOA journalists.

Really can’t get any more basic than that. Basically it’s saying no one from the US government, no agency or official, can reach in and interfere with our work. Very plain and simple.

So with all of that, all of that background and the statement of the Guide, here are a couple things that could be possible violations. It could be a US ambassador, someone from the State Department, demanding that we not air a particular interview, or that we not give a specific slant to a VOA story. If an official from outside of VOA, and I ask you to take note of those three words, “outside of VOA,” that’s going to come into play in a few minutes, or from another federal agency, asks you to use your access or position as a journalist, to gather information on their behalf, that could possibly be a firewall violation.

Some things that are not firewall violations: we have to do our work. Every day, we have to talk to people in government, we have to talk to people on the Hill, at various agencies. The firewall does not stop us from reaching out and doing our work, but it does literally block people from reaching in and trying to influence our work. Keep doing your work the way you do every single day.

**Audience**: Sorry, another question. How are contractors handled?

**Springer**: Contractors, when they’re working for VOA, this is the same thing. They are to be treated like they are working for VOA, so they can reach out and do their work, and get interviews and do what they need to do, because when they are working for VOA, they are representing VOA in that regard. Does that make sense? Okay. The second bullet point on here, I actually included this because of a question that came to me when we were working on this last year: “It is not a firewall violation for an editor to make changes in a reporter’s or writer’s script.” Here’s what happened: A reporter came up to me, and said that he or she had handed in a story to an editor, and the editor handed back the script after reviewing it and had taken out an entire paragraph and said, “Here’s your final version.” But there had been no discussion, and so the reporter’s question to me was, “Wasn’t that a firewall violation because the editor was interfering with my work?” My answer to that was, “It’s not a firewall violation. An editor is hired to work with reporters and writers to make the final product the best that it can be. But it needs to be a conversation. What it was, was bad editorial practice.

For about 15 years before I worked in Standards at CNN, I did script approval, and my method of doing it was that when I got a script form a reporter, I would print out a hard copy, I’d go through it and make my notes for what I thought might be changed, I’d go back into the computer, I’d dupe over a new copy, I’d type up my suggestions, and then I’d email it back to the reporter and say, “Here’s my suggested edits, let’s talk.” And then we’d talk it through. That’s what a good editor should do. A good editor should talk through a script, a story with a reporter or a writer, but they shouldn’t just change it without having that discussion. Not a firewall violation—bad editorial practice.

**Audience**: So what happens if your editor feels intimidated to change a story and make it political when it was originally artistic because he or she feels pressure that management is going to be angry if it doesn’t include that political part of it?

**Springer:** That’s actually a wonderful cue. I’m going to get to that in two slides. Now, I just said the firewall is violated when anybody from outside VOA, from another U.S. government agency or another US government official, tries to interfere with our work. But one of the questions Amanda had was “Okay, so who in VOA is actually covered by the firewall?” Because there was a misunderstanding that for some reason the VOA front office was somehow outside of the firewall, which implied that either (a) they couldn’t commit a firewall violation, in other words, even if they did, it wouldn’t be one, or that one couldn’t be committed on them. And the more that our group discussed it the more that we realized that didn’t make sense. So literally everybody in VOA is inside the firewall from front office through all the GS levels. Meaning anyone within this agency could possibly commit a firewall violation, and anyone could possibly have a firewall violation committed on them, which is the segue to your question: reporting violations.

If you think that a firewall violation has occurred, in the sense of someone interfering with your work, someone changing the work for something other than a sound editorial reason, normally I would say “let your…as the first bullet point says, notify your immediate supervisor, division director, or service chief know immediately.” But, if you think your immediate supervisor or service chief or division director has committed a firewall violation then let me know. And then I can start asking questions and trying to dig into it. Now, this could be an email, it could be a phone call, it could be someone coming to your desk. If it feels like someone is interfering with your work for something more than general editorial changes that could be a firewall violation. This last one: “Under no circumstances should a VOA employee or contractor turn over unpublished on unaired news coverage to any third party without first consulting with VOA senior management.” This is also news industry standard. Every news organization follows this. The basic premise to this is that if you go out and you shoot an hour’s worth of material for a video package, and you’ve got b-roll and you’ve got soundbites. You come back in but you know your piece is only going to run three minutes. That means, in all likelihood, you’ve got 57 minutes of video that may never see air. It may sit on a hard drive, it may sit in NetApps, who knows. It doesn’t mean that the 57 minutes is bad, it just means you picked the best three minutes you needed. And in that regard, now that material is VOA’s property. Consider it like if someone come to your door and said “Hey, can I borrow your television for a little while?” Well, you’re not going to just turn over your television just because someone asked for it. Same thing, you’re not going to turn over this material just because someone came to our door and asked for it.

This has been in the Best Practices Guide since 2011, but we moved it into the firewall section because of something that happened last year, which was the Turkish service’s coverage of the scuffles, the confrontations that happened at the Turkish ambassador’s residence when President Erdogan came here. Briefly, what happened was Turkish service had all that great video of the confrontations with police and the demonstrators and the security folks and the second video of President Erdogan arriving at the Ambassador’s residence, watching all of this going on and then walking into the residence. So we, I think virtually every language service either aired that or put it on their websites, and we shared it with any news organization that asked. We gave it to AP and Reuters, we gave it the local stations here in town, we gave it to the five US networks, New York Times, Washington Post, if anyone asked for it, what was published, we said “Go ahead, use it, give us proper credit. Don’t obscure our logo.” That was great. Shortly after all this happened, DC police department eventually got in touch with the BBG Office of Security and asked to see all of the video. BBG Security, there used to be a guy there that I worked with on these kind of things, and he knew what the procedure was. But by the time this happened he had left the agency and the guy who replaced him didn’t know the procedure. He went straight to the Turkish Service, said “DC Police wants to see all your video,” and they handed it all over the DC police. I am about 99.9% certain that that is the incident that prompted Amanda to ask us to review the firewall policy. Because she, coming from the private sector, the commercial side, also knew that this is industry standard—you don’t just turn over unpublished, unaired material. So if this should happen, let your supervisor know, and then it will go up the chain as necessary, if this should ever happen to you. The key things here in all of this, and you’ll see in the scenarios, don’t try and solve these things yourself. Move it up the chain so that you can continue to do your work and not have to be bothered with this. And because of this particular situation, we don’t want anybody to have to try to solve it themselves. So just keep that in mind.

So all of this brings us to the four scenarios. As I said, one is real, three our work group put together to try to put in differing degrees of difficulty. So let’s get to the first one. For the purposes of our discussion, this is an email. It is an email that came from someone in IT, one person in IT. “It has come to the attention of the IT Directorate and the IBB Office of Security that some agency employees would like to download material related to the story that appeared on the front page of the Washington Post regarding leaked classified material about the US efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are a number of documents currently available on the internet that are classified as secret or higher. While the material has been leaked, it has not been officially de-classified and, for our purposes, is still considered classified material. Our agency network, storage systems, and email are not classified systems and cannot have classified material stored on them. Please do not download, browse, or email any of these files from agency computers.” The question here is whether this email from someone in IT…forget about whether or not it’s classified documents for the moment…was this email from IT a firewall violation?

**Audience:** I think it should’ve gone through somebody in the management instead of going through IT.

**Springer:** Okay, anybody else?

**Audience:** [microphone was not on]

**Springer:** Well, in order to answer that I have to tell you that this is the real situation. This was the original release of classified documents by WikiLeaks in the summer of 2010.

**Audience:** And we needed it then, to do our story.

**Springer:** Right. I was, and that’s basically it, I was managing editor of Central News when this happened and I will tell you that the day that this happened, the day that this hit our inboxes, the newsroom exploded. Who is this one guy in IT to tell us, and Paul hit on it, who is this one guy to tell us how to do our work as journalists? Remember, a few minutes ago, I asked you to pay attention to: “If a federal official from outside of VOA (BBG, IBB, VOA). IBB and BBG are outside of our firewall. And so for him, this one person, a non-journalist, to tell the journalists what to do, someone outside the newsroom directly interfered with news coverage. Now, to get back to the idea of being classified documents and having to follow presidential directives, because we are part of the Executive Branch, we weren’t quite sure how to get around it.

At that time, the Chairman of the Board of Governors was Walter Isaacson, former President of CNN, former editor in Chief of Time magazine, journalist. He understood what we wanted to do. He sent a note to Security, IT, and the General Counsel’s office and said “You’re going to find a way to let our journalists do their work and review those documents. Our journalists are not going to rely on second-hand reporting from the Time, the Post, CNN or any other news organization. There’s information in there that is specific to VOA language services, and we need to see those documents. So what happened was, this is the short version of it, but what happened was, IT then gave the newsroom four laptops that were completely clean. No browser history, no stored documents, nothing. As clean as they could be. And they gave us four Wi-Fi cards so that we could connect to Wi-Fi networks outside of the workings of this building. To literally get outside the BBG network. The laptops were given to two senior reporters and two senior editors. The reporters went into WikiLeaks, found what they were looking for, wrote the scripts, emailed them over to their editors, who then, working with the writers, reporters, edited the scripts, and then we sent it out to the house and published it on the web. At the end of the day, those laptops and Wi-Fi cards went back to IT, IT scrubbed the laptops completely clean all over again, and gave it back to us with the Wi-Fi cards the next day. I think we did that for about two weeks, two reporting weeks, until we were satisfied that we had gone through those documents and found stories that were of interest to the house and of interest to specific language services depending on what we found. That wasn’t the best solution, but it was the only solution we had. And in 2010, we weren’t talking about this being a firewall violation, we were just talking about “Why is this guy interfering with our work?” And Paul what you were saying was, in answer to what you were saying was, I think if this email had come from the VOA Director at that time, we might have still been angry about it, but at least it would’ve come from our boss on the journalism side, and if I remember correctly, the person in IT who sent the email didn’t even consult the VOA front office that he was going to send this email. So the front office was just as caught by surprise by this just as we were. So there were a few mistakes there, as far as how we should’ve been notified. So yes, it was a firewall violation, but as you can see, it wasn’t an easy one to necessarily get around.

**Audience:** So how do employees, at the BBG level, or IBB, know about our firewall? Are they taking this type of workshop too?

**Springer:** Jeff has made sure, Jeff Trimble has made sure that they are aware of it. Some BBG staff from their front office has taken it, so they are aware of it, and the fact that Jeff and I have talked since I started doing this in January, I think if there was a situation like that, I could go to him and say, “Hey, we got a situation here.” So I think we’re okay as far as that’s concerned.

**Audience:** Yeah, I’m not so much worried about that, I’m worried about the individuals, because that IT person might not have known about the firewall, maybe it’s a new person that was just hired, how do they find out about what they can do and what they can’t do with regards to us at VOA?

**Springer:** What I can probably do is maybe when all of this is done, when I’m done with all the training, I can finally send out a house-wide note and, because I think my original note about taking the firewall training only went to VOA staff, I don’t think it was an IBB notice, this house note. I could go back and look but I can always update that, and if I need to sit down with BBG staff and do it, I’ll do it. That’s fine, that’s not a problem.

Scenario number two. Now you know, these next three are hypotheticals, and like I said, we tried to put differing little pieces of difficulty into each of these. A VOA language service is in touch with hijackers who have taken hostages. I always, as soon as I read this, I think it’s a plane, on a runway, so let’s go with that as the scenario. The reporter has been corresponding with them through multiple channels, including WhatsApp, phone calls, and texts. The hijackers are threatening to kill the hostages if their demands are not met. The FBI become aware of the fact that VOA is on the scene and asks for one hour of access to the reporter’s phone so that the FBI can retrieve information that may lead them to their hideout, their headquarters, whatever it may be. The phone is the personal property of the reporter, it’s not an agency phone. In addition, what should the reporter do with all of this going on, and is the request from the FBI a firewall violation?

**Audience:** I think nobody can ask you to hand out any property, but I mean in this case it’s a tricky one because it’s his personal phone, right? But if you are protected by the firewall, and you are working in ours, you know, for the VOA, and you’re on assignment for VOA, you should be protected, everything should be protected, or not.

**Springer:** Okay. No, that’s reasonable. Anybody else?

**Audience:** I mean, you’re talking about human life as well, so…. There’s got to be contingency plans for that. But I would say obviously go to your supervisor.

**Springer:** I’m sorry, what?

**Audience:** Obviously, go to your supervisor.

**Springer:** We discussed this, our work group discussed this, for a good 30 or 40 minutes. And as far as what the reporter should do, that is exactly what we came up with. Let’s put it this way: we’ve got three people who can do reporting sitting on that side of the table. If you’re the reporter covering a hijacking, and you’re within distance of that plane, you’ve got one responsibility and one responsibility only. To cover that story. You can’t be wasting time and taking your eye off the scene because this changes minute by minute and second by second, and trying to negotiate with FBI. Remember, don’t try and resolve this yourself. Now, going back to that same slide, “If a federal official from another federal agency asks you to use your access of position to gather or provide information on their behalf that could appear to be a firewall violation.” So the reporter has to tell the FBI agent, “Look, I’ve got to talk to my folks back in DC. They’ve got to be the ones who are dealing with this because I’ve got to cover the story.” Now, the fact that the FBI is involved, it may well be that if you went back to one of your service chiefs, or you went to, say, someone like Barry in the newsroom, I would say that that will probably very quickly scale up to the VOA Director’s office, and then GC will get involved, and probably talk to the FBI here in town about how to handle this.

Now, your point, some of our colleagues have made the same point, we’re talking about a humanitarian thing here, why wouldn’t we, why wouldn’t that reporter give that information to the FBI. Well here’s where that gets a little tricky. Let’s assume in this modern day and age that the hijackers are very technologically smart and proficient. And because the reporter’s been communicating through WhatsApp, phone calls, and texts, all of those obviously involve a phone number. So now they’ve got the phone number of the reporter they’ve been communicating with, and if they’re technologically smart and they have a GPS app on their phone or whatever they’ve got with them, they can track, through that phone number, the GPS location of the person they’ve been communicating with. So they could know that the reporter’s maybe 50 yards away in a terminal, or maybe 50 yards away in another part of the runway. And if they’re technologically smart, if they see that information is starting to flow out of that device, out of that phone number, and possibly be able to track where it’s going and find out what that phone number is, and can track that phone number and find out it’s an FBI agent, what’s to stop them from killing hostages?

So there’s so much going on here, so much more than just what’s in front of you on the screen, that’s why, don’t try and solve it yourself. You keep yourself focused on the story, and hopefully the folks back here will figure out the best thing to do. Now, it may be that when all this information comes back, maybe you’ll be told, give them the information. I don’t know. But we don’t know that the way the scenario’s played out. Your point about it being the reporter’s phone, colleagues have raised that question too, but the fact is, you are working for VOA, even if it’s your personal phone, all that information has been stored because you’re covering the story. So we kind of put that in there as a little bit of a red herring, just as a decoy, because yes, all that information is what you gathered in reporting the story up till now. So that’s that one.

**Audience:** How about if somebody’s embedded, let’s say, your reporter is embedded with FBI, is in on the story, or he has given them a tip about something that is going on, and he is playing around.

**Springer:** We shouldn’t necessarily be aiding and abetting the FBI. That’s not our job. Our job is to report a story. If FBI becomes aware of the fact that we’re working on a story, and they want to contact us, they should contact us through the General Counsel’s office. And then we’ll go through the process that way. But we shouldn’t automatically be working with the FBI unless we’ve already cleared it in advance, and by clearing it I mean whether it’s the General Counsel’s office that’s set it up, and making sure that senior management knows about it. Okay?

Third scenario. A spokesperson from a US embassy contacts a VOA correspondent about a story the correspondent wrote. The spokesperson says there’s a factual error in the story that should be corrected, but the embassy also feels the story portrayed the US position unfairly and suggests or requests that the story be rewritten. Was this a firewall violation?

**Audience:** Absolutely.

**Springer:** You’re sure?

**Audience:** So, it’s people outside VOA that are telling us to rewrite the story that we wrote as journalists.

**Springer:** Okay, you’re half right.

**Answer:** Well the reporter can always say, go pound sand, and talk to my supervisor.

**Audience:** Well, it’s both though, because there’s a factual element too, right?

**Springer:** Bingo, this is 50/50. Anybody, embassy spokesperson, somebody sitting at home in their living room in Chicago, somebody sitting at home in their living room in Johannesburg, can contact us or any other news organization, and say, “You’ve made a factual error.” It could be a title, a name, a statistic. It could be anything. If it’s factually wrong, we have to change it. If it’s in a radio broadcast, the next time that broadcast comes up, you correct it immediately in that broadcast. Next time a, if it’s in a TV show, the next time that particular show is up. If it’s on the website, you change it as quickly as possible and you include the disclaimer saying, “This is a corrected version of the original story” and explain what the correction is for. But it has to be done immediately.

But yes, suggesting or requesting or demanding that we rewrite the story, absolutely a firewall violation. One of our colleagues in one of the sessions said, if that second sentence ended at “They also felt that the story portrayed the US position unfairly,” and that was the end of the sentence, that’s fine. They’re entitled to their opinion, no problem. Now, you take that complaint, maybe the reporter contacts his or her editor and says, “We got a complaint from the embassy. Why don’t we, we could take a look at the story and see whether or not it’s balanced or fair.” The other thing you can do is also ask another editor who had no involvement with that story, so has none of the background information, and you ask that other editor, “Can you take a look at this story? Take a look this script.” Don’t tell them why; just ask them what they think of that script as written. Now, if the three of you all feel that it’s a little out of balance, sure, you can rewrite it. But, if you feel it’s dead center, on target, and there’s no imbalance in the story, you leave it the way it is, but you definitely don’t change it just because they don’t like it.

**Audience:** And, what if I’m not sure if you heard my story before.

**Springer:** No, because I was trying to figure out what was going on with the video.

**Audience:** Oh, okay, so I very briefly, yesterday, went and covered a story where there were some congressmen, and I ask hard questions to the Republicans about, you know, how the Trump administration is handling the Endangered Species Act. And after I asked, two interns, because it was obvious that they were interns, came and said, “Give me your full name, give me your email,” I said, “Yeah, well what is the problem?” He said, “The congressmen wants to make sure where the story’s going, how the story’s going, or how it will be written, or something like that.” And I took it as, “So, you are going to report me, that if I did something that probably he doesn’t like?” I said, “Give me the contact information of the press officer, email, you know, name of the congressperson, name of this person, and I will send you the link once the story is published.”

**Springer:** You did exactly the right thing. Absolutely. They have no right to review our stories before they are published. There can be times where if someone has said something to you in an interview, and you’re doing your final version of your script, and you want to make sure that after you’ve listened to the transcript of the interview and you’re putting in the quote or you’re putting it into your video piece, if you want to make sure that that person has said exactly what they wanted to say, there’s nothing that stops you from emailing them or calling them and saying, “I just want to make sure, I want to clarify, we’re going to be using this quote in the story, and I want to clarify that what you said is exactly right.” And then they can tell you that, but they do not get a chance to review the whole story before publication. Absolutely not.

**Audience:** And the fact that they were forcing me, like they were even doing this to each other, like, to give them all my full information.

**Springer:** Um, you know, there’s nothing that says you couldn’t give them a card if you had a card, and just say, “Here’s my card.” You know, if it was me I probably would’ve said what you said about “when the story’s done I’ll send you the link, but if you want my information, here’s my information.” Now, we get emails all the time, and I see them from the best practices side, when people from the outside have complaints about stories that are written, and how they get my email address I don’t know, but that’s fine, it comes to me, if it had been the kind of thing where they passed that on to the congressperson and the congressperson was then going to contact you and say, “Hey, I want to see this,” then we’d scale it up a notch and figure out what to do about it. But it wouldn’t have been so terrible to give it to him.