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Broadcasting A Global Sampler

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SAN FRANCISCO
GESTURING forcefully in his cluttered office, Jamal Dajani looks and sounds more like an old-school Chicago newspaperman than his somewhat lofty title might suggest: director of Middle Eastern programming at Link TV, the nonprofit, 24-hour channel that brings satellite news from around the world to American households.

Mr. Dajani, a 50-year-old Palestinian-American journalist, produces “Mosaic: World News From the Middle East,” a Peabody Award-winning 30-minute daily report culled from the dispatches of more than 35 Mideast television broadcasts. In their not very ample spare time Mr. Dajani and his Israeli-born production partner, David Michaelis -- along with six editors who double as translators -- produce a weekly commentary program, “Mosaic Intelligence Report,” in which Mr. Dajani offers his views, based on reporting, about topics like the progress of the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

“We’re trying to give people here a window on what 300 million people in 22 countries are seeing on a daily basis,” said Mr. Dajani, who starts monitoring broadcasts at 4 every morning at home then comes into the office here to pull each day’s show together.

“Mosaic” and “Mosaic Intelligence Report” are part of Link TV’s experiment in cross-cultural



ROGER MACDONALD/LINK TV



AMIR TERKEL/LINK TV

programming, an ambitious effort that bills itself as “television without borders” and runs on an annual budget of \$6 million, the price of a “couple of episodes of a network television series,” said Kim Spencer, Link TV’s president.

Mr. Spencer, a former news and documentary producer for ABC and public television, said he grew frustrated by the mainstream networks’ lack of interest in international news and the slothlike pace it took to get his work on the air.

“I made my first trip to Iran in ‘97 for a documentary, a dialogue between

A quick jump from an idea to a network offering news and documentaries from around the world, with a library of 800 music videos.

an English teacher in Tehran and an American schoolteacher in Washington, D.C.,” he recalled. “We came back and had the film in the can in January, and they said they thought maybe they could get it on the air by September.”

By contrast Link TV came together on short notice. In 1999, under new F.C.C. regulations governing satellite providers, DirecTV and the Dish Network had to set aside channels for noncommercial educational purposes. (Applicants were also required to have legal status as nonprofits.) “We had less than a month to prove we had the capability to get on the air,” Mr. Spencer

said. His team quickly put together a schedule of original and repackaged documentaries, world music and news. By Dec. 15 Link TV was broadcasting.

The initial team included Mr. Spencer's wife, Evelyn Messinger, who produces "Global Pulse," a three- to five-minute show of perspectives from around the world; Lorraine Hess, who is now director of programming; and Steve Lawrence, who handles world music from the network's offices in New York.

Ms. Messinger's series tackles subjects like the growing conflict between the United States and Iran, framing it as a heavyweight fight between the countries and their allies in the court of international opinion. "After living abroad for a long time I remember coming back and reading magazines like Harper's, with smart people writing interesting stuff but not taking into account what was going on in other places," Ms. Messinger said. "There's a huge cognitive break between America and the rest of the world."

But amid such weighty issues, Mr. Spencer said, it was necessary to leaven Link TV's package of documentaries and news with music because "there's only so much that any person can take of watching the woes of the world."

Mr. Lawrence, an MTV veteran, is in charge of the channel's roster of 800 videos. "What we hear over and over from viewers is that music programming is something that arrests them when they're channel flipping with us," Mr. Lawrence said. "They see a video by an artist in another country -- South Africa, Brazil, Caledonia or whatever it is -- that they're not going to get somewhere else, and they're transported to another musical culture."

Such outreach has been rewarded by testimonials from performers like Willie Nelson, Cher, Angelique Kidjo and Dave Matthews, all urging listeners to support the station. "A lot of musicians watch Link," Mr. Spencer said. "They go on these long tours, and they're stuck in their bus with a satellite. It's 4 or 5 in the afternoon, and

they're waiting to go on. What else are they going to watch?"

Mr. Nelson said his wife, Annie, is a fan, "and she turned me on to it." Speaking by phone from his biodiesel-fueled bus before a gig in Columbus, Ga., he said: "I watch it a lot now to see news from all over the world and listen to the music. They have a lot of good things you don't get on the commercial networks."

Although Mr. Nelson said he persuaded several fellow musicians to watch Link TV, the appreciation doesn't necessarily apply to his sidemen. "They're into the comedy channel," he said, laughing.

Over the past two years the station has been supported by 40 grants of more than \$10,000 each, including contributions from the Ford, MacArthur and Annenberg foundations and a \$2 million, two-year gift from the Hewlett Foundation, with half of the money earmarked for "Global Pulse." But Mr. Spencer emphasized that Link TV needs the kind of viewer support that public television receives. "We created an outlet for the kind of programs I couldn't get on public TV," he said. "Now we need the money to actually make them." The message seems to be getting through, if a recent drive to support "Mosaic," which exceeded its goal of \$200,000 by more than 10 percent, is any indication.

Link TV is also working to cross media borders; it recently signed a deal with AT&T's new digital service, U-Verse, to make programming available via phone lines in the next year. "We want to be accessible to everyone, everywhere," Mr. Michaelis said. "Four minutes of 'Mosaic' is easily downloadable."

Mr. Dajani added: "We don't want to talk only to the baby boomer generation. Ten years from now, being on television is going to be the least important form." Already there is additional life for programming on Link TV's Web site, linktv.org, which the network says gets about 650,000 hits a month, and through YouTube, iPhone and other outlets.

Of the 30 million American households that he says get satellite programming, about 5 million regularly watch Link TV an average of 2.5 hours a week, according to the network's figures. About six million more households can see the channel's programming through cable outlets, including MNN (Manhattan Neighborhood Network, Channel 34) in New York and channels in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Phoenix and other areas.

Mr. Spencer, who has made three trips to Iran in the past year to bring back documentaries and films -- broadcast Wednesday nights under the rubric "Bridge to Iran" -- said the need for such programming has never been more urgent.

"The news here is about whether we're going to bomb them, but in Tehran they don't believe that will happen," he said. "If more people in this country knew about the culture and the people of Iran, we'd be more careful about what we do."

But Mr. Dajani emphasized that Link TV's role is journalism, not advocacy. "It's not my opinion that matters, but to bring you what people are seeing that has interest to viewers," he said. "It's not about the numbers. There was a suicide bombing in Baghdad, and 17 people died. I'm more interested in the man on the street and the various factions we can talk to. Why did this happen?"

PHOTOS:

Top, Jamal Dajani, left, and David Michaelis are production partners for the Link TV program "Mosaic Intelligence Report."

Bottom, Mr. Michaelis, left, and Mr. Dajani in "Occupied Minds," a Link TV documentary about their work together.