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U.S. press missed a lot in Gaza, producer says

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Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton visits Israel and the West Bank this week, giving the U.S. media another opportunity to tell the story of the 22-day war between the Israeli military and Hamas in Gaza in December and January. To San Francisco-based Middle Eastern media watcher Jalal Ghazi and other analysts, few Americans saw as many of the devastating images from Gaza as the rest of the world did.

Ghazi did. He is an associate producer for "Mosaic," a Peabody Award-winning daily aggregation of Middle Eastern news programs produced by San Francisco's Link TV. "Mosaic" culls broadcasts from 36 stations in 22 countries in the region.

With U.S. news organizations cutting their overseas operations over the past several years, viewers have to surf online and throughout the satellite TV universe to find substantial and sustained international coverage. Analysts say with more foreign reporters "parachuting" into an overseas location during a crisis, coverage is more likely to rely too much on official government mouthpieces.

We didn't see the (Gaza) war at all here. We didn't see the destruction," Ghazi said. "The war may have ended, but the suffering is continuing there." This week, U.S. reporters can use Clinton's Middle East visit in the wake of the Obama administration pledging \$900 million in reconstruction aid to Palestine to vividly show the aftermath of the war, which killed more than 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. And, suggested Ghazi and "Mosaic" producer Jamal Dajani, journalists can press U.S. officials on how the aid will find its way to those living in Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas. The U.S. government considers Hamas a terrorist organization and has no official contact with it.

The high level of interest in the war made the Palestine-Israel conflict the

second-most covered overseas story in the United States (behind the Iraq war) in the year ending Feb. 1, according to the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

"The amount of coverage was unusually high for an overseas story," said Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of Pew's Project for Excellence in Journalism. "The question is: What was the quality of that coverage?"

Because Israel did not allow foreign reporters into the region, Link became one of the few portals for American audiences to see extensive footage of the destruction from inside Gaza - not filmed from a distance at the border.

"Israel's official public relations effort was disproportionately successful," wrote Andrew Tyndall, who monitors network news coverage for his blog, the Tyndall Report (www.tyndallreport.com). During the week of Jan. 10, Tyndall reports that "the networks quoted 15 separate sound bites from Israeli politicians, spokespeople and experts all week; one from Hamas and one from the Palestinian Authority."

Arab networks such as Al Jazeera had reporters in the cordoned-off region, but only a couple of tiny U.S. cable providers carry Al Jazeera English, which is seen in more than 100 countries and online. Other U.S. outlets don't carry footage from Arab media outlets, including a dozen that still operate in Gaza. Many are leery of outlets that are state-controlled or represent partisan political viewpoints.

As CNN's Campbell Brown said last month in urging Israel to lift the foreign journalist ban, "Much of the information coming out of Gaza is impossible to verify, and many of the images you see on television are provided by Hamas."

But "Mosaic" producer Dajani called that "total nonsense." Dajani was in the region in late December when the war started. He was stranded at the Gaza border with other foreign journalists and wrote that Western reporters could be "found hanging around the Hilton

in Tel Aviv and the American Colony in Jerusalem sipping on martinis and exchanging laughs with their Israeli fixers."

Dajani called on Western news agencies to vet the images they see from Middle Eastern TV operations in the same way they would any other source. In these days of diminishing news budgets, "You have to look for new synergies," Dajani said.

Indeed, some network reporters locked out of Gaza did use material from other sources. Footage from a Jan. 6 NBC News story on an overwhelmed Gaza hospital - complete with images of wounded children - was from a photojournalist inside Gaza the network hired, anchor Brian Williams told audiences. And a Jan. 9 ABC News report on children killed during the war used footage credited to Ramattan, a Palestinian news outlet based in Gaza.

But that ABC story noted that 257 children had been killed - it didn't divide the number by the number of Israelis or Palestinians. Dajani and other analysts say that sort of vague reporting gives the impression that losses on both sides of the war were equal. He hopes for more nuanced coverage during Clinton's visit this week.

Link TV is available on Channel 375 on DIRECTV satellite TV service and on Channel 9410 on DISH Network. In parts of the Bay Area, it is available from 1 to 5 a.m. Monday through Friday on KRCB, digital cable Channel 22. For more information on how to receive LinkTV, go to www.linktv.org/reception.

"Mosaic" is available online at www.linktv.org/mosaic.

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