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Web lets foreigners comment on U.S. race Sites accommodate increased interest in presidential politics

By Joe Garofoli
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The engorged U.S. media posse following Sen. Barack Obama around the world this month is an aberration in these days of shrinking foreign news coverage, but the 200,000 Europeans who heard the Illinois senator speak Thursday in Berlin weren't. There's a thirst for information outside the United States beyond breathless reporting on "Obamamania" - a phenomenon which may be big in Europe, but is largely absent in the Middle East.

The challenge to trafficking more international opinion: With 64 percent of U.S. newspapers cutting foreign coverage and TV networks shuttering overseas bureaus, where can those international voices find a platform?

Two new online projects - Dear American Voter by San Francisco's internationally focused cable and satellite channel Link TV (www.linktv.org/dearamericavoter) and Voices Without Votes (www.voiceswithoutvotes.org) by the global citizens media aggregator Global Voices Project - are providing ways for foreign citizens to comment on the White House race in unprecedented scope.

And some Americans won't be happy with what they hear and read.

Americans "don't know about the suffering of people," an unnamed

Iraqi refugee living in Syria said in a subtitled video comment on "Dear American Voter." "The thing that Americans know best is how to take the oil or anything good that Arabs have." The choice of candidate won't matter, she said, as the past five years of war in her native land have "passed like 500."

On the same site there is a video posting from Khaya, a South African who addresses his comments to "my fellow Americans" as a member of the international community.

"The world does not perceive you as strong, but arrogant. Not powerful, but as a bully," Khaya said. Some may think that "people accuse America of arrogance because of jealousy and envy. This is not the case. People love America, but we want to love it even more, but for your leaders."

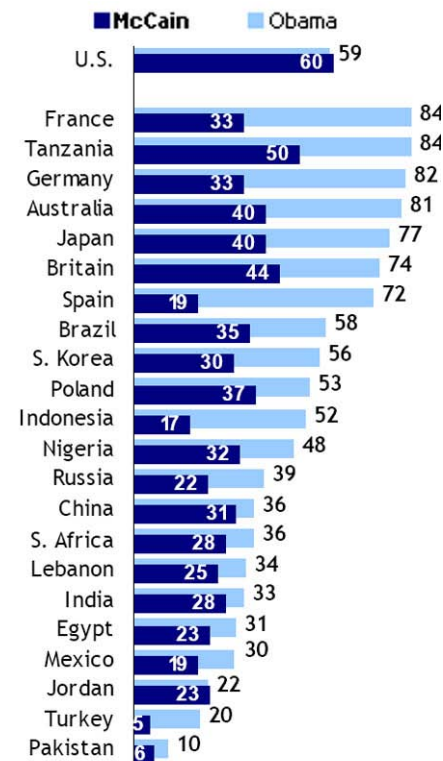
By choosing Obama, Khaya said, "America will be sending a message to the world that if he becomes president, that America has its mojo back."

Foreign interest high

A June survey of more than 20 countries by Pew's Global Attitudes Project found "considerable interest" in the race. Eighty-three percent of Japanese respondents say they are following the race closely or very closely, and interest was high in Germany, Australia and Great Britain, too.

Obamamania isn't everywhere

While Europeans paying close attention to the U.S. presidential election generally express more confidence in Sen. Barak Obama than in Sen. John McCain, neither candidate gets much positive support in Middle Eastern Countries, according to a survey published July 16 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project.



Based on respondents who say they have been following the U.S. presidential election very or somewhat closely.

Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project

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Why do foreign citizens care so much? Because they feel that the United States has a "pernicious"

effect on their home economies. “In no country does a majority say the U.S. economy is having a positive effect,” the Pew survey said, “although Nigerians, Indians and South Africans are more likely to characterize it as a positive effect.”

The strength of that international interest is what led LinkTV and Global Voices earlier this year to create ways for the global community to contribute to the political discussion that’s been going on in the United States for the past 20 months. Traffic is small on these new political sites, but both organizations expect it to grow as the election draws closer.

Global Voices Project ordinarily monitors international bloggers discussing issues that aren’t part of the U.S. media conversation. “But this issue, everybody is talking about it,” said Global Voices managing editor Solana Larsen. Not only are overseas conversations about issues not often heard in the U.S. media, like the drug war in Colombia, but “the issues are not all black and white. When you hear from other perspectives, it makes it more complex,” she said.

Fed up with U.S. policy

“A lot of the world is fed up with the U.S. foreign policy - and it’s not just a George W. Bush thing,” Larsen said. One common denominator she found with U.S. coverage: “It’s hard to find a lot of posts about John McCain. People want to talk about Obama. He’s new and different. And it’s not all positive.” A July 16 study from Pew’s Global Attitudes Project found Obama’s support in the Middle East, while generally better than McCain’s, to be lukewarm.

“There’s still a lot of skepticism there about all of the candidates,” said Pew’s Richard Wike.

Like this post from a Palestinian blogger on the site Bruised Earth, who felt Obama’s visit to the Palestinian territories this week was too brief:

“Let us not forget that Obama was the one presidential hopeful strong enough to speak out against the violence and plight perpetrated on the Palestinian people. Where is that leader now?”

Why should Americans care what foreigners think about their presidential race?

“The Constitution wasn’t made to cover the entire world so this is OUR election. No true American should give a flying fig what a foreigner says about our elections. Period,” wrote Warner Todd Huston, a commentator on the conservative Newsbusters.org site, in a recent critique of the Dear American Voter site.

He notes that while Link TV describes its site as nonpartisan, there are few conservative viewpoints on it. Plus, one of LinkTV’s funders is the Open Society Institute, which is led by George Soros, a major funder of liberal political causes and a supporter of Obama. Roughly a quarter of the visitors to Link TV’s Web site are from overseas and the rest are from the United States.

But Americans need to hear global viewpoints on the election, because “the world is networked, from Beijing to Oshkosh,” said David Michaelis, Link TV’s senior editor of current affairs. “If you want to withdraw from that world, it is too late. What you don’t know will hurt you.”

E-mail Joe Garofoli at
jgarofoli@sftime.com

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