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DIGITAL MULTICASTING WorldLink extending global niche to pubTV

Just as WorldLink TV spotted a distribution opportunity in the FCC requirement of public service channels on DBS satellites, the network is positioning itself as a provider of international programming for public TV stations' digital multicast channels.

In one Arab Diaries program (right) offered by WorldLink, a young couple struggles with religious prohibitions placed on interfaith marriage.

With funding from the Ford Foundation, the San Francisco-based network has begun offering programs to public TV stations in overlap markets, where there will be more multicasting channels than public TV can easily fill.

The pilot project brings a new strand of international programs to stations that want to differentiate themselves from mainstream PBS outlets. It may also enable WorldLink to establish itself as a source of unique PTV content during and after the digital transition. "One of our goals is to work with stations to become a source for international programs within the public TV family," says Kim Spencer, cofounder and president of WorldLink. "Sort of like PRI is to NPR."

The channel is now available in 18 million DBS homes, mostly in rural areas. Its audience includes a lot of young people, particularly high school and college students, who get hooked on the channel after stumbling onto its world music videos. Recent immigrants also watch, along with journalists and others who want international news.

WorldLink's package of fall shows includes several documentaries about Middle Eastern cultures, including *Arab Diaries*, a five-part series profiling individuals from several different countries at various life stages, and stand-alone docs



about journalists working in Palestine and Algeria. Studs Terkel narrates a documentary about corporate media ownership, "Fear and Loathing in the Newsroom." "McLibel: Two Worlds Collide" tells the story of a man and woman who took on the McDonald's Corp. and were sued for libel. The package

also includes two installments of First Peoples TV, a showcase of documentaries by and about Native Americans.

WorldLink could not afford to pay producers for national broadcast rights on all PBS stations, says Jack Willis, cofounder and programmer. So the fall slate of shows will be available only to "a limited number of stations."

Late last year, WYBE in Philadelphia aired six WorldLink docs in a trial run. The station, which has tailored its service to international and multicultural audiences for years, already had a regular slot for international documentaries — Wednesdays at 10 p.m. Viewer response to the programs was strong enough that the station is looking to schedule more shows, says Sheri Hope Culver, g.m. The station is particularly interested in more world music programming from WorldLink.

Another outlet for WorldLink is KWSU, an overlapped station that has two other PBS outlets broadcasting into its home market of Pullman, Wash. The station began using WorldLink to differentiate its service this summer, says Karen Olstad, acting g.m.

“This is a different, true alternative, and we think it will appeal to a diverse university community that’s interested in world affairs and cultural events.” The campus of KWSU licensee Washington State University is relatively empty during the summer, so the station won’t be able to assess viewers’ reactions until this fall.

-Karen Everhart