

Link TV finding audience with “Mosaic”

By Ray Richmond

When the George Foster Peabody Award winners were announced earlier this month, there were some raised eyebrows and puzzled expressions among many in the television news business when something called Link TV and its program “Mosaic” was included on the list of this year’s 32 honorees. Suddenly, a network that for five years had been one of television’s best-kept secrets happily found its cover blown.

For the uninitiated, Link TV is a 24-hour noncommercial network dedicated to providing U.S. audiences with global perspectives on news, events and culture. The channel’s mandate is to enlighten viewers on what’s really going on in the global village through a mix of documentaries and investigative reports blended with culturally diverse music programming.

After launching in December 1999, Link TV now is available in more than 24 million satellite homes on DirecTV and Dish Network. Link TV gained its carriage through the FCC’s mandate that satellite TV platforms set aside a certain amount of channel slots for commercial-free, public service programming.

Those who are said to be early Link TV converts are Bill Cosby,

Cher, Dave Matthews, Brad Pitt, Bonnie Raitt, Willie Nelson and Harry Belafonte. Cosby actually cut a promo for the channel a few years back after accidentally stumbling across it.

“It’s nice to have some high-profile fans,” admits Kim Spencer, Link TV president and one of its three co-founders. “The great thing is they came to find us organically, just because they flipped us on.”

More and more viewers seem to be doing that these days because of a globally diverse program mix that simply can’t be found anywhere else — with some 95% of the choices new to U.S. audiences. Although Link TV isn’t measured by Nielsen, Spencer cites one research firm’s estimate that 5 million Americans watch at least an hour of the channel every week.

What they’re watching covers more than 120 hours of docs and reports, often liberal-leaning in their perspective, on issues including human rights, the environment, the effects of globalization, sustainable development, women’s rights and nuclear buildup. The Link TV lineup includes “Spotlight,” the only major weekly series of investigative documentaries acquired from independent producers, the BBC



and other broadcasters around the world; and a provocative, no-holds-barred talk show, “The Active Opposition,” hosted by Peter Coyote.

“We draw from the top-quality programs offered around the world,” Spencer said. “That includes a lot of shows already produced in English. There are a lot of shows that aren’t commercial enough for BBC America but we welcome.”

The show that earned Link TV the Peabody, “Mosaic: World News From the Middle East,” is a daily half-hour (airing at 7:30 p.m. PT daily and repeating every six hours) that distills news reports from 30 Middle Eastern TV outlets and presents snippets translated into English but uncensored.

What turns out to be such a revelation about “Mosaic” is the fact that it supplies the only true collection of different views from TV networks out of the region, with the compilation culled from Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia and others. Many Americans are familiar with the Al

Jazeera network operating out of Qatar and might have assumed it was the only service broadcasting to the region.

“Al Jazeera is only the largest and most volatile of the networks in the area,” “Mosaic” producer Jamal Dajani explains. “But if you watch only Al Jazeera, you receive only one view. Our commitment is to open a true window on the Middle East.”

Adds Spencer: “The White House and State Department both monitor ‘Mosaic.’ We know it because we get calls from the White House Communications Office if we ever change the time of the show, for instance. You would think the CIA would do their monitoring for them, but we’re happy to help.”

Winning the Peabody was a huge honor for a show that covers so much ground with a staff of six — a fraction of the manpower employed on most mainstream TV news programs.

“We show material you’ll never see on CNN or Fox News Channel,” Dajani stresses. “Our goal is to illustrate the fact that the Arab world is not a monolith and that, apart from the war on the ground in Iraq, there is a war of information in the air on satellite. Are some of these networks that we cover biased? Of course. But we feel the American public is intelligent enough to decide for themselves from all that they see. And hopefully, somewhere, the truth emerges.”



Spencer

Spencer emphasizes that from Day 1 Link TV has taken pains not to adopt any sort of political stance of its own. “Our only bias is in our opposition to following what you see in the conventional media,” he says. “We’re here to provide alternatives that wouldn’t be available if we didn’t exist.”

Indeed, if the channel had a business plan when it hit the air, it would have been to serve as the anti-network. The idea for Link TV took root when Spencer, then a TV producer working internationally for ABC News, noted the massive number of quality programs produced overseas that never made it before U.S. audiences.

“The conventional wisdom was that foreign news didn’t sell,” Spencer says. “The assumption was that the public wouldn’t watch things that were subtitled or deemed ‘too European.’ But I didn’t believe that.”

And so Spencer and partners Jack Willis and David Michaelis pressed ahead with developing a network that would furnish world views to a U.S. audience that supposedly had no interest in anything outside of their country. It went on the air after raising a modest \$3 million in grants and “carrying an enormous leap of faith,” as Spencer recalls. “Everybody told us we’d need \$15 million-\$20 million to get off the ground. We somehow made it work on substantially less.”

The timing of Link TV’s introduction was fortuitous. After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, U.S. news organizations were suddenly back in the foreign news business. And a channel dedicated to world views suddenly didn’t seem like such an antiquated idea.

Now, the network survives on a paltry annual budget of \$5 million raised from a combination of grants and public donations. Like PBS, it depends on support from groups including the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (both of which supply grants to “Mosaic”).

There also are negotiations under way for Link TV to expand beyond satellite onto cable systems in major cities, Spencer says. And various public TV stations already have begun picking up individual programs like “Mosaic.”

“The beauty of it is that we have no target demographic,” Spencer adds. “We get everyone from those over 60 to Gen Xers who flock to the global hip-hop music. Our audience is anyone who wants to learn more about the world we live in or experience a different perspective. It turns out that’s an awfully large group of people.”