

Link TV lets viewers tune in a world perspective through international newscasts, films, music



AP Photo/Jeff Chiu

By Lynn Elber
AP Television Writer

Television can peddle soap, cars and political candidates like nobody's business. But in one contrary corner there's a network selling viewers on an idea: Looking outward to understand the world and how to live in it.

Noncommercial, 24-hour Link TV, with a budget that might cover a broadcast network's executive bonuses, offers international newscasts, documentaries and music shows aimed at helping Americans assess the global picture, big and small.

"Our goal is to engage Americans and give them the information they need to make smart choices as citizens ... and to get involved," said Link TV co-

founder and president Kim Spencer, a former ABC News producer and documentary filmmaker.

He described Link's programming as "a pretty eclectic mix. You can go from seeing news from the Middle East to a documentary on China to a mix of world music videos you won't see on MTV."

"It's ironic, but Americans with 200, 300 channels really have a very limited choice compared to some in other parts of the world," Spencer said.

"Mosaic," Link's Peabody Award-winning half-hour daily sampling of newscasts from 30 Middle Eastern broadcasters, is the hallmark of the network that is delivered primarily via DirecTV and Dish

Network to 28 million U.S. homes.

Reports from Egypt, Jordan and Israel and elsewhere are presented unedited and translated, if required, into English. Want to know what Iranians are hearing on their state-run newscast? Tune into Link for Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.

Starting next year, the program "Global Pulse" will showcase news from other regions along with commentary and public opinion polls to provide context.

Among the first areas of attention will be Latin America, which has produced such provocative images as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez denouncing President Bush as "the devil" in a United Nations speech.

"But what do we really know about what's going on in Latin America?" said Spencer. Link's distillation of news and analysis could begin to fill in the gaps, he said.

On the cultural side, November brings the launch of movie series "Cinemondo," with the U.S. debut of films including Iran's Oscar-nominated "Border Café" and "May 6th" by Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker killed over his sharp criticism of Muslims.

"Out of the Box," an original Link series hosted by actor-activist Peter Coyote, searches for stories and individuals overlooked by mainstream TV news.

Link's extensive slate of documentaries range from "Bad

Medicine,” about the dangers of counterfeit drugs, to lighter fare including “Accordion Tribe,” about a gathering of great accordion players, and “The Girl from Ipanema,” a look at the song’s legacy and bossa nova.

The network’s funding is a combination of grants and viewer contributions, with support from celebrities including musicians Dave Matthews (“He became hooked on Link and would watch it on his tour bus,” Spencer said), Willie Nelson, Bonnie Raitt and Cher and actor Brad Pitt.

The bulk of Link’s \$6 million annual budget is provided by organizations including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The latter joined with Link to launch “Mosaic” in 2001, one month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

“Link is the kind of fast-moving, entrepreneurial organization that can do something new without an act of Congress or a stockholders’ meeting,” said Eric Newton, the Knight Foundation’s director for journalism initiatives. With “Mosaic,” Newton said, Link offers the kind of coverage that can’t be found elsewhere and shares the foundation’s vision of “free-flowing international news.”

Wendy Hanamura, station manager, pledge-drive producer and more for San Francisco-based Link TV “It’s a small organization. We all wear many hats” called the network “an exciting place to work.”

“You can have a good idea on Monday and if you can find funding for it ... you can be in production in a matter of weeks,” she said.

Some Link programs are available on cable in a few markets, in-

cluding San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and New York City, and on local cable access and university channels. On Link’s Web site, material including all past editions of Mosaic some 600 is available.

The network, which marked its sixth year in 2005 by winning broadcasting’s prestigious Peabody for “Mosaic,” still is trying to cut deals with major cable operators.

It’s Link TV’s vibe as much as a specific program that keeps more than 5 million viewers tuning in on a regular basis.

“Our viewers are coming to Link not necessarily for appointment viewing around a particular program but because all of our programs take them to this connection we make for them to the rest of the world,” Spencer said.

Charles Noble, an Orange County, California businessman, considers Link a valuable alternative to broadcast news and an adjunct to PBS’ “NewsHour.”

“I don’t even watch the networks. You can go from one news channel to the next, even though they’re on different networks, and it’s the same subject. ... It’s not in-depth,” Noble said. “Link takes a subject and really goes into detail.”

The programs “allow you to draw your own opinions because they’re not political statements. It’s somebody saying, ‘Here’s what we’re doing, or here’s what I experienced,’” Noble said.

A majority of Link’s programming is acquired from outside sources such as the BBC in Britain and ITVS, Independent Television Service. More than 90 percent of the network’s fare is airing for the first time in the United States.

“These are documentaries that

deal not only with difficult social issues around the world but people who are making a change,” Spencer said. “We try not to leave people in a puddle on the couch thinking, ‘Oh, my God, now what do I do?’ We generally try with our programs to offer something you can do,” such as connecting with organizations.

It’s an approach that draws a varied audience. According to research surveys, more than 56 percent of regular Link viewers also watch Fox News Channel. Forty-two percent of them voted for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004; 31 percent voted for President Bush.

“People who watch a lot of different perspectives don’t close themselves off,” Spencer said. “We’re not trying to be (liberal radio network) Air America. We’re trying to be accessible to anybody who’s a thinking American.”

On the Net: <http://www.linktv.org>