

National Public Radio
Weekend Edition Sunday (12:00 Noon PM ET) - NPR
March 17, 2002 Sunday

WorldLink TV airing a daily compilation of news broadcasts from the Middle East

ANCHORS: LYNN NEARY

REPORTERS: JOHN McCHESNEY

Transcript:

LYNN NEARY, host:

If you have satellite television, you can drop in on broadcasts from around the world, including from a variety of countries in the Middle East. The programs are aired by WorldLink TV, a non-profit channel with studios in San Francisco. The program is called "Mosaic" and it presents a daily compilation of news broadcasts from the region. NPR's John McChesney reports.

JOHN McCHESNEY reporting:

WorldLink TV has been on the air for a couple of years now. But after the September 11th attacks and a grant from the Knight Foundation, the channel added "Mosaic." The broadcast has sparked increased interest in one of the few and largely unknown non-commercial channels on satellite television. Viewers can see news from Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Dubai, Morocco and even Al-Manar, the station financed by the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah guerrilla organization. In this sample we hear first from the Palestine Broadcast Authority, then from Iran and then from Nile TV, from Egypt.

(Soundbite of broadcasts)

Unidentified Man #1: Two Israeli reserve soldiers who signed a controversial potential refusing to serve in the occupied Palestinian territories have been jailed for 28 years our reporter said Tuesday. The...

Unidentified Woman: In a meeting in Tehran on Tuesday with organizers of guided tours to the battlefields of the Iraqi-imposed war, the Islamic revolution's leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, analyzed the superpowers' behavior in the past century, saying they've always targeted the national identity and moral strength of other nations in a bid to reach their own objectives.

Unidentified Man #2: US President George W. Bush praised the Middle East peace initiative presented by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, and thanked him by telephone for the proposal.

McCHESNEY: Many of the newscasts are already in English, but if they're not, or if there are film clips in Arabic, WorldLink provides a translation. Most of the segments are downlinked from state-supported television networks and are presented unedited. Kim Spencer, WorldLink's

president, says it's important for Americans to see this kind of material, even though it reveals a clear bias.

Mr. KIM SPENCER (WorldLink President): I think what's really important is to see how other people are learning about the world, what their broadcasters are presenting to them, and it will be very important for us as Americans to see how we're perceived, to see how our president and our actions are portrayed in the daily news that's coming down into these homes of the places that now we're involved in.

McCHESNEY: Jamal Dajani, WorldLink's director of Arab programming, is of Palestinian descent, and says that in his travels in the Middle East he's found that many people there actually see more diverse television programming than Americans do.

Mr. JAMAL DAJANI (WorldLink Director of Arab Programming): I was surprised, you know, you walk into someone with very little means and you find the big satellite dish and they're watching CNN, they're watching TV CINQ in France, they're watching the Italian networks. And here we are in America, we're just hooked on the very few--I don't want to name them--and this is what the average American, you know, viewer is watching, just our production.

McCHESNEY: Dajani says it's not always easy to procure the programming from Middle Eastern sources. WorldLink has not been able, for example, to get programming from Al-Jazeera, the Qatar-based private network which became widely known for broadcasting messages from Osama bin Laden. Al-Jazeera, he says, got a taste of big money in a deal with CNN.

Mr. DAJANI: Some of the networks are just commercially inclined to say, 'Well, how much, you know, are you going to pay us?' And we say, 'Nothing,' and they say, 'Thank you. No thank you. Goodbye.' And then the others, they don't know us. They're a little bit suspicious. 'Well, why are you doing this?' and so forth, and there is a little bit of bureaucracy involved.

McCHESNEY: As is the case with Israeli television with whom WorldLink is still negotiating.

(Soundbite of broadcast)

Unidentified Man #3: More than 6,000 people came from Mexico and all parts of the world.

McCHESNEY: In WorldLink's small master control room, a documentary about the peasant uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas is playing. Material from the Middle East is only a small part of what the channel offers. WorldLink programming rotates through a holding of nearly 200 documentaries and 300 music videos from every corner of the world. Company president Spencer is a former independent documentary producer and he says he had a hard time finding an outlet that would air documentaries, so he founded WorldLink. It's hard to say just how many people watch the satellite channel. Nielsen still doesn't measure the satellite audience. Spencer says e-mail from viewers indicates that many are recent immigrants to the United States, but others are also strong supporters. Suzanne Maxton(ph) teaches high school in Windsor, north

of San Francisco, and uses some of the broadcasts in her classes. She says she doesn't worry that the students will be misled by state-sponsored propaganda.

Ms. SUZANNE MAXTON (Teacher, Windsor, CA): I think it is apparent to them. I think you can see the language that's used and the jargon that's used and, for us, what we're accustomed to, is a pretty rigid kind of presentation, right? And we know we're getting a party line. But it's interesting to see what that party line is. This is what people experience. We've got our own party line here. You know, it's much more open. But it's a party line.

McCHESNEY: Maxton's frustration with what she sees as the limitations of American reporting from the Middle East has made her a passionate devotee of WorldLink. WorldLink has just added a talk show covering Middle Eastern issues that originates once a week from Washington, DC. It's sponsored by Abu Dhabi Television and hosted by the president of the Arab American Institute, James Zogby. The program takes calls from all over the world, including the United States. John McChesney, NPR News, San Francisco.