



With satellite television and interactive “spacebridges,” Kim Spencer thinks the tube can change the world.

TODD SCHWARTZ
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Sailing soundlessly at 7,000 miles an hour through the hard light of the sun, a communications satellite holds position above an often-tormented Earth. There, on satellite TV, between the movies, pro bull riding competition, and ubiquitous Friends reruns, is something as rare as reason on American TV: a decidedly and very intentionally wide-angle view of the world.

This particular bandwidth slice of digital cake is Link TV, the first and only national network “bringing Americans a global perspective on world issues and culture,” as reads its press kit. What Link TV, against all odds, is beaming 24/7 into our living rooms is a breath of always fresh, sometimes frightening air. Unlike the “world-as-packaged-in-Atlanta” soundbites of CNN, Link TV gives the planet a chance to express itself in its own voice, with

source nations and perspectives that change all day long. By turns it is educational, entertaining, uplifting, shocking, fascinating, and scary as hell.

Which is exactly what Link TV co-founder and president Kim Spencer ’70 wants. “This channel was created,” he says from Link TV’s modest San Francisco headquarters, “as a way for people to meet the rest of the world face to face, and as an antidote to misunderstanding, insularity, and the American-centric view that is pervasive on this nation’s TV sets.”

Watch, for example, Mosaic: World News from the Middle East, the Link TV program that has attracted the most attention during the war in Iraq. This daily program monitors news broadcasts from 16 nations, Egypt to Abu Dhabi, Israel to Iran, Syria to Yemen, translating the coverage into English and offering Americans rare insight into how events are

seen, interpreted, and reported in the Mideast.

“The program is sort of a Rashomon,” Spencer says. “It’s remarkable how many ways the same event can be seen. And I think many Americans are now beginning to realize how dangerous it is not to know what other people think of you.”

As well as broadcasting news programs from around the world, Link TV also airs interactive programs like Global Link, Active Opposition, and the youth-focused Chat the Planet. Spencer has seen television as a two-way stream for 30 years now, so it’s no surprise that these series connect the Link TV audience with individuals



around the world through digital video links.

While operating on a budget totaling about 1/100th that of the niche channel Oxygen (which debuted about the same time as Link TV), Spencer's network is available to the 21 million U.S. households receiving sa Kim Spencer, now 55, grew up in the heartland, outside of Chicago. He was one year into engineering at Purdue when the politics of the '60s came calling. Spencer found himself wanting to change everything, beginning with his education. He had heard about Reed and when he asked one of his professors, the answer was, "If you can get into that school, you certainly should." It was the fall of 1968, and Spencer could and did. He quickly became involved with the Reed community, working on the Quest, which gave him dual grounding in journalism and rabble-rousing. By the time of his graduation in 1970, he was a political science major with an affinity for local motion.

"Reed had a big impact on me," Spencer says. "There was a real sense of community there—and a feeling of responsibility. My politics were formed in that environment. Trying to make a difference became my goal."

After graduating, Spencer stayed in Portland and went to work with the Multnomah County Community Action Agency. And then it happened: Sony introduced the first small, mobile, and affordable TV camera. Spencer's agency got one of the new cameras and he immediately began using it to help community groups tell their stories.

"Video was so powerful, such a new media back then," Spencer remembers. "From the beginning, I thought it was a great tool for social change. When the legislature would start talking about shutting down a senior center or a day care facility, we'd make a tape of the people involved and go down to Salem and show it to the legislators. It worked—the centers stayed open."

After a couple of years Spencer

went east to begin a master's program in city and regional planning at Harvard. When he heard that the media department at MIT needed someone to teach students how to use the new portable video equipment, he volunteered—which led to his joining MIT students at the New Hampshire primary in 1974, producing a video aboard Ronald Reagan's campaign bus. Spencer was hooked. He left graduate school and spent the rest of the '70s as an independent video producer making documentaries on clean water, the environment, and other issues. The programs were shown to local governments and community groups—narrowcasting before narrowcasting had a name.

"I was still focused on community organizing," says Spencer, "and video was simply a tool. It wasn't about mass media—there was no chance of ever getting these things on the air, because there was such a gap between what we were doing and broadcast quality."

On March 28, 1979, Reactor Two at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant suffered a partial meltdown. Spencer was living in Washington, D.C., producing environmental documentaries, and when he heard that a large anti-nuclear demonstration was planned at the U.S. Capitol, he and his colleagues realized the protest could be meaningful live television.

"I had read somewhere about a new satellite TV system at PBS," Spencer recalls, "and a law that specified that any excess channel capacity on that satellite could be used by independent nonprofits. So we went in, plunked down our 501(c)(3) business card and asked for time to cover the demonstration. The guy said 'OK, I guess you qualify,' and all of a sudden we had the first national live TV broadcast not controlled by the networks."

The protest drew thousands of people, including concerned celebrities and famous musicians. The live broadcast on PBS went off without a hitch and surprised

everyone by garnering good ratings and national media attention.

"We lucked out," Spencer says. "That launched my broadcast career—by chance, really. But we were the hot new thing, and we began producing live events for PBS."

It wasn't long before he began pushing the form, and his luck held. On Thanksgiving Day in 1980 he was producing a live PBS special called America at Thanksgiving. The program, hosted by Art Buchwald, originated from six holiday dinners, ranging from a Midwest farm family to sharecroppers in the South, from a motorcycle gang gathering to an Air Force base mess hall. The plan was for Buchwald to interview each of these groups, but at one point the leader of the bikers started talking directly (the live feed meant they could see and hear each other) to one of the Air Force officers. Buchwald let them go, and soon the others joined in—and the first of Spencer's groundbreaking and ether-spanning "spacebridges" was born.

"We hadn't really thought that people would start talking two-way," Spencer says with a quiet laugh, "but they did, and it was good stuff. Later I was making an edited version of the program with my future wife, Evelyn Messinger [they were married in 1983], and she said 'This is amazing. Think what you could do with this! Imagine if you could link Russians and Americans'—this was when the cold war was still on—you could overcome political boundaries, get real people who are so-called enemies to talk.' We envisioned a program and took it to PBS, but we couldn't get them to fund us. They didn't think it would work. But we wound up producing programs like that all through the



1980s.”

In 1982 Spencer and Messinger co-founded Internews, a nonprofit media production company. They spoke with Gosteleradio, then the official Soviet radio and TV committee, and proposed a two-way satellite link that would allow Soviet and American scientists to discuss the effects of nuclear winter. Through a combination of skilled negotiation—and the fact that the Soviets believed the three-person Internews was much bigger than it was—the program came together and produced landmark agreement on both sides: nuclear winter would ravage the planet. It drew a national audience in the U.S.

“Suddenly,” Spencer said in a 2001 online profile by Kaitlin Quistgaard, “we realized we were not just making TV, we were shaping the relationships between these two countries.”

By 1987 the relationship among Spencer, Messinger, and the Soviets was strong enough that Internews was able to coax members of the U.S. Congress and deputies of the Supreme Soviet to talk with each other live via satellite. Spencer co-produced the resulting series, *Capital to Capital*, with ABC News and won two Emmy Awards. Within two years, Spencer, a decade removed from making grassroots videos that he knew didn’t have a chance of being broadcast, was a senior producer for ABC News PrimeTime Live. Big budgets, big news stars, big stories—and after three years, big frustrations.

“People said, ‘Man, you’ve made it! A senior producer at ABC!’ They couldn’t believe it when I quit,” Spencer remembers. “It was 1992, and I left because the kinds of stories I wanted to do just didn’t interest them any more. The conventional wisdom was that international stories didn’t sell, that the ratings would go down when an international news piece ran on PrimeTime Live. Stories about OJ played better.”

Messinger had been offered a job in Paris as electronic media adviser



Spencer meets with LinkTV’s director of development Kathy Pace on his right, and Link TV co-producer Toni Whiteman, left.

to the George Soros Foundation, so off they went with their 4-year-old twins, Sam and Kate. Spencer’s ability to make his own luck continued: friend and French television producer Patrice Barrat had just been awarded ten one-hour slots on France’s Channel Four and associated European networks, with the only mandate being to do something different and interesting.

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Later that year the mandate of creating different interesting television put Spencer and his *Vis à Vis* crew in a battered Jeep at a makeshift checkpoint in Somalia. It still will be several months before U.S. troops arrive. Someone has just



stuck a gun in the driver's window and fired, the bullet going out the passenger window far too close to Spencer's nose. He and his crew are paying \$100 a day—to seven terminally stoned, lethally armed Somalis, ranging in age from 12 to 50, who had stolen this Jeep from the U.S. Embassy, bolted a rocket launcher on the back, and hired themselves out—to prevent exactly this kind of unpleasantness.

It occurs then to Spencer that, even though he has somehow convinced a Canadian cargo plane to fly him, his crew, and a two-and-a-half ton satellite dish into a remote desert location in Somalia, had his \$20,000 video camera stolen at gunpoint, purchased it back for \$700, and was now deep into producing one of his innovative, interactive dialogues linking a United Nations official in New York City with a Somali woman who ran a local U.N. food program. . . . it occurs to Spencer that things just might be getting a little out of hand....

Over the next six years, Spencer would co-produce more than a dozen of these programs, including the occasionally life-threatening Somalia show and dialogues between two black cops, one in Philadelphia and the other in Soweto, South Africa; two schoolteachers in Iran and Washington D.C. (Spencer was the first American TV producer to work inside Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution); two teenage girls growing up in war-torn Bosnia and Northern Ireland; and two young men, one an Israeli and the other a Palestinian.

In 1999 Spencer and Messinger returned to the U.S., and after more than a year of planning, applications, proposals, and presentations, their brainchild WorldLink TV (now called Link TV) has been awarded one of the highly coveted satellite spots made possible by the FCC guidelines requiring DirecTV and DISH to allocate four percent of their channels for non-commercial public service programming. Spencer realizes they have actually pulled it off. He also realizes they

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— Kim Spencer

have less than five weeks until they must be on the air 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And he realizes that, at least for the foreseeable future, he has traded the cameras and endless adventures of the globe-trotting producer for the phones and endless pitches of the deskbound fund-raiser.

Today, Link TV has overcome perhaps the most difficult barrier: simply getting on the air. Television isn't known for its love of high-quality, meaningful-content TV. But Spencer is confident that, as long as FCC regulations hold (and as long as he can keep raising the several thousand dollars per day it takes to stay on the air), his network is secure.

Which leaves Spencer free to continue using Link TV to do what he resolved to do all those years ago at Reed: make a difference. As his friend and co-producer Barrat has said of Spencer: “In the back of his mind, he always has a secret agenda, which has to do not with television but with the real life of the people around.”

“We want to connect the people of the world literally, not

just figuratively,” Spencer insists. “Throughout my career I’ve tried to focus not just on the movers and shakers, but also on the moved and shaken. Now that we have the channel, we want to use it to get people involved in their world.”

As it has since Multnomah County bought that first Sony video camera, new technology helps draw the arc of Spencer's career. With two-way teleconferencing equipment getting better and cheaper all the time, Spencer and Messinger are working toward the day when Link TV viewers can watch a program on any given issue, then simply go to the nearest school, library, or mall, even a local café or coffeehouse, and add their voice—and, importantly, face—to a live follow-up conversation.

“The amazing thing is that TV still has a role to play,” says Spencer. “When we launched the channel people said ‘Television’s a dinosaur, man, streaming on the Web is the thing.’ Well, those [Web broadcast] companies went through a couple billion dollars and now they’re gone. And here we are. We believe it is possible to have a true citizen’s TV channel, connecting people face to face. And it’s possible around the world, even on the most basic videoconferencing gear. As long as you can see a smile, a tear, a blush—as long as you can see that expression and emotion. That face-to-face contact is something that was always promised to us, since people first imagined picture-phones! I continue to believe it is one of the tools we have to connect people and find a better world.”

