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Program brings Middle Eastern news to American audience

BYLINE: By MICHELLE R. SMITH, Associated Press Writer

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High school history teacher Suzanne Maxson is fed up with U.S. television coverage of the war on terrorism and what she believes is its lack of a global view.

"The more interested you are in what's going on in the world, the more frustrating it is," complained Maxson, who lived in Iran for two years as a child. "When it's not shrill, it's sentimental, and it's a very narrow view."

Maxson, who makes a point of discussing current events with her students in the San Francisco suburb of Windsor, tunes in to "Mosaic," a half-hour news show featuring unedited newscasts from Middle Eastern broadcasters translated into English.

The program, which operates with a staff of six in a bare-bones studio in San Francisco, began airing in December and reaches viewers daily through San Francisco-based WorldLink TV, a noncommercial satellite channel that focuses on world events and culture.

"When you watch 'Mosaic,' you're reminded that these countries have their own issues," Maxson said. "Our concerns of the moment are not always their concerns of the moment."

Viewers see stories from Dubai TV in the United Arab Emirates mixed with Jordan TV, and Al Manar, the television station financed by the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah guerrilla group.

The show carries news from the Palestine Broadcast Authority and is in negotiations to add Israeli TV.

"Mosaic" also offers opinion pieces, such as an item from Arab News Network, which airs Arabic language news from London, suggesting that Osama bin Laden is dead and the U.S. government has kept it a secret to continue its military campaign.

All are shown unedited, translated into English as closely as possible. When a broadcaster refers to Israel in Arabic as "the Zionist entity," that's how it's translated.

"If this is what they refer to it as, we will show it, and we will not change the words," said Jamal Dajani, WorldLink's director of Arabic programming.

Kim Spencer, co-founder and president of WorldLink, says the growth of the U.S. immigrant population is creating a largely untapped and growing market.

"No one is programming to those people in English," Spencer said.

WorldLink was created in December 1999 after the Federal Communications Commission ruled satellite services must set aside several stations for nonprofit, public service programming.

It now reaches nearly 17 million homes and 30 million adults through DirecTV and the Dish Network. Nielsen Media Research doesn't yet track viewership on satellite channels, but a study commissioned by the station in November estimated that 1.2 million adults watched WorldLink one to four hours per week.

WorldLink is supported by grants and membership, much like PBS. "Mosaic" gets \$250,000, most of its money, from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which supports journalism initiatives worldwide.

Spencer, a documentary filmmaker and a former producer at ABC's "PrimeTime," believes "Mosaic" fills an important hole in international news.

Other foreign, English-language news shows airing in the United States include Deutsche Welle's "Journal," which has a European and German perspective and also airs on WorldLink. "Mosaic" is the only such show focused on news from the Middle East.

The perspective fascinates Al St. John, 67, a retired store owner and engineer who lives in what he calls "the boondocks," in the mountains of Kern County, Calif.

St. John can't get cable, and depends on the Dish Network to get his TV news.

"You always have the nagging suspicion that the news programs are giving you a slanted perspective. You wonder what it would be like to get news programming from other countries - now we do," he said. "It makes you realize there are many sides to all of these problems, and the side that's presented to us is really only one."

Though most Arab governments control their media, Dajani says there is a trend toward more independent reporting as well as a more visually appealing style.

"What we're seeing now is different from 10 or 20 years ago," he said, noting a recent story "Mosaic" aired about women's rights in Iran from IRIB2, a government-run station in the normally closed and secretive country.

The success of the Qatar-based news network Al-Jazeera - which displeased some Arab leaders by airing bin Laden's videotaped messages - has prompted other Arabic-language networks to emulate its methods, said Shibley Telhami, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who studies media in the Middle East.

"They really are a lot more critical and more open than you would think," Telhami said.

Much of that criticism is leveled at the U.S. government, which has complained about Al-Jazeera's coverage of the war on terrorism.

"Now we have a free press," Dajani said, "and you're telling us not to show pictures of bin Laden?"

On the Net:

<http://www.worldlinktv.org>

<http://www.dishnetwork.com>

<http://www.directv.com>

<http://www.brook.edu>