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Network gives Arabic reports a U.S. outlet

BYLINE: By Joshua L. Kwan; Mercury News

Monitoring a rack filled with 14 television sets and VCRs, Nora Alsaidi watched and recorded the apparent last gasps of Iraq's state-run satellite station.

Alsaidi also saw exclusive interviews with Iraqi soldiers who had surrendered to Kurds in northern Iraq, footage of women and children apparently injured from American bombs falling on Baghdad, and stunningly clear video of explosions rocking buildings near a reporter in Baghdad.

These reports did not appear on U.S. networks Thursday. They were the images of war shown on televisions across the Arab world.

Alsaidi, 26, is one of three Arabic-English translators at San Francisco-based WorldLink TV, which gives American viewers a half-hour window, five days a week, into the living rooms of the Middle East.

The non-profit station takes feeds from 16 channels broadcasting from Morocco to Israel to Iran, translates a mix of breaking news and cultural stories into English and splices them into a half-hour program called "Mosaic." Subscribers to the two main satellite operators in the U.S., DirecTV (Channel 375) and the Dish Network (Channel 9410), receive WorldLink in all standard packages.

For many Americans, "Mosaic" is their only glimpse of the news from an Arab perspective. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq -- and its coverage by the Arabic press -- provided a dramatic story line for the program's daily show: What are Arabs watching? And what stories are missed or ignored by the American media?

"This is what people in the Middle East are watching," said Jamal Dajani, 46, who directs "Mosaic."

Thursday, when Saddam Hussein's government attempted to issue a message to the Iraqi people about the U.S. attack, the Iraqi station's signal was jammed, apparently by American forces. But the signal was later restored.

When bombs fell on Saddam's palace in Baghdad and American and British troops entered the country from Kuwait, Iraqis could only watch a recorded patriotic choral music concert on state-run television.

Meanwhile, other Arab stations were airing footage that most Americans couldn't catch on CNN, Fox, or the major U.S. networks.

Crews from Abu Dhabi TV, based in the United Arab Emirates, were stationed in several locations within Baghdad, and one blue-helmeted reporter described the scene live as explosions lit up the night sky just behind him. CNN, at the same time, was showing grainy video of a green-hued Baghdad with commentary from Wolf Blitzer in Kuwait.

Another Abu Dhabi reporter secured an exclusive interview with three Iraqi soldiers who had surrendered to Kurdish forces in the north. Asked why they had fled the army, the soldiers complained of low wages and poor treatment at the hands of their superiors.

A Jordanian television reporter spoke with several people in a hospital who said they were injured in an American bombing attack. "There was blood and smoke everywhere," said a woman lying on a bed.

Throughout the day, Alsaïdi and two colleagues, Souheila Al-Jadda and Jalal Ghazi, scanned the TVs, popped in fresh videotapes to record the news shows, and played and replayed the best material until they had translated the dialogue exactly.

With a typed transcription in one hand and the corresponding videotape in the other, Alsaïdi and her co-workers shuttled back and forth to the video-editing room, where video editor Michael Aston digitized the tapes and recorded voice-overs in English.

To end the day's program, Dajani, the producer, chose to air the final broadcast from Iraq's satellite station -- a feed from Al-Jazeera, the CNN of the Arab world, then a snippet from a black-and-white movie showing farmers with hoes in a field.

Moments later, a still photo of a young Saddam, with a cleft chin and the Iraqi flag, appeared. The station's signal fizzled into a rainbow of vertical bars, then collapsed into darkness.

Friday, the only feed WorldLink TV received was a picture of the rainbow bars with a note in English telling viewers that the station was experiencing "technical difficulties."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To stream or read a summary of "Mosaic" or for more information about WorldLink TV, click on www.worldlinktv.org.

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