



Israeli helps broadcast Arab news from S.F. satellite

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By Abby Cohn, *Bulletin Staff*

For many Jewish viewers, the half-hour broadcast from a tiny San Francisco satellite network may be painful to watch.

The uncensored newscasts from Arabic stations regularly heap criticism on Israel, attack American foreign policy and portray world events from a heavily Islamic perspective.

But to David Michaelis, the Israeli journalist who helps produce "Mosaic," the five-day-a-week show conveys essential information and viewpoints needed by all Americans, many of whom are largely uninformed about the Middle East.

"Since 9/11, we're not a luxury, we're a necessity," said Michaelis, director of current affairs for WorldLink TV. The nearly 3-year-old nonprofit network created Mosaic last December as a window into the Arab world. The show is transmitted to 18 million American households with satellite TV.

After the terror attacks, Americans "wanted to know what hit us," Michaelis said, and station executives responded with a regular selection of news reports viewed by more than 280 million people in the Middle East.

"We think the diversity of voices in the Arab world is very important for Americans to be acquainted with," said Michaelis in a recent interview from WorldLink's offices and studio on Battery Street. "We believe that this diversity is important because our motto is: 'What you don't know will hurt you.'"

The show, produced in a separate studio on Sacramento Street, routinely carries about six short news reports, either spoken in English or with English translations.

After some internal debate, producers decided to exclude some of the particularly gruesome images of violence that are common to Middle Eastern news.

A special telecast for the first anniversary of the terror attacks gives a sampling of the show's variety of perspectives and ferocity of opinions.

A report from Morocco's 2M TV describes how "Arab countries lost billions of dollars and the United States has gained international support." On Iraqi state television, a broadcast claimed that the Bush administration was using the terror attacks as a pretext to attack the country. The Ramallah-based Palestine Broadcast Co. quoted Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat calling the Sept. 11 attacks "a crime against humanity."

The 56-year-old Michaelis, a longtime editor and producer for IBA TV responsible for the "Popolitika" current affairs show, doesn't expect American viewers to use the broadcasts as either an impartial or primary source of information.

"We trust the intelligence of the viewer," he said. "We give the information as it comes from the Middle East. We don't interpret it. We don't add any value judgments."

The show's director is Jamal Dajani, a 45-year-old Palestinian American who helped broker agreements with Arab stations and now reviews hours of broadcasts daily before selecting those that will be aired.

Michaelis called their working relationship "a role model of how Palestinians and Israelis can work together." Both grew up in Jerusalem.

Until now, Mosaic has carried no newscasts from Israel, but Michaelis said his station is finalizing an agreement to carry programming from an Arabic-language satellite channel recently launched by Israel Broadcasting Authority.

"We are showing to American viewers what Arabs see in the Middle East," Michaelis explained.

Just as Michaelis maintains there is no single Arab voice, so he thinks there is no single reaction to Mosaic from American or Jewish viewers. And because satellite TV has no ratings system, Michaelis doesn't know how many viewers are watching. "We reach 18 million homes," he said. "We don't know how many click in."

Funded largely by the John S. and James L. Knight and the Hewlett foundations, Mosaic is just one of WorldLink's programs with a global focus. The network also airs a world music program and documentaries, such as a recent film called "Peace in Sight" that follows a team of Arab and Israeli eye doctors.

Recent viewer responses e-mailed to the network included many positive comments about its general programming and Mosaic. While one viewer complained about the lack of an Israeli perspective, another called Mosaic "my favorite show." Yet another wrote, "it is a pleasure to view the foreign news without the filters used by the U.S. media."

Said Michaelis: "I think the service we're providing is decoding the Middle East."

Mosaic is broadcast at 3:30 p.m. Monday - Friday on DirecTV Channel 375 and EchoStar Communication's Dish Network Channel 9410. It repeats at 11:30 p.m., 5:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Information and sample shows: www.worldlinktv.org/mosaic

