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IJ photo/Robert Tong

**GLOBAL VIEW:** Kim Spencer (left) is WorldLink TV president and co-founder. Evelyn Messinger (right) is president of Internews InterActive. The channel is a nonprofit cable television station based in San Rafael. The station is carried on the DISH Network and DIRECTV satellite networks and reaches 18 million viewers nationally. Programming focuses on international issues and use video conferencing technology to allow viewers to call in and talk to sources from around the world.

By Carolyn R. Saraspi  
IJ reporter

Instead of giving audiences just a window on the world, independent satellite television channel WorldLink TV breaks through the proverbial pane so viewers can engage in discussions with program guests from around the globe.

The San Rafael-based nonprofit channel combines

## Connecting the world through television

the traditional TV audience call-in format with two-way video conferencing to connect Americans with a variety of people involved in a particular foreign event or issue.

WorldLink works closely with Internews InterActive, a San Rafael media firm,

using digital formats to connect people on the street with television broadcasts.

“Contrary to conventional wisdom, Americans are really interested in what’s going on in the world,” said Kim Spencer, a former TV news and documentary producer

who launched WorldLink in 1999 and now serves as the channel’s president. Producers travel to events in Asia, Europe and Africa in search of people to participate in projects. Audio and video feeds are transmitted via integrated services digital network (ISDN) lines that can each carry 128kb of data to the channel’s studio on Battery Street in San Francisco.

From there, control room producers, editors and technicians put the feeds together with live, in-studio content as the program airs.

The technique evolved from the two-way satellite TV “spacebridges” Spencer pioneered in the 1980s with wife Evelyn Messinger, also WorldLink’s director of interactive programming and president of InterAct.

Spacebridges involved satellite TV exchanges and were used in numerous programs such as “The Moscow Link” and the Emmy-award winning “Capital to Capital” connecting American scientists, journalists, politicians and others with their Soviet counterparts.

The digital capabilities have brought down the \$500,000 TV production costs with previous technologies, said Messinger, who also is a former producer for CBS and public television. The first compressed video system for “Vis a Vis,” the critically acclaimed series co-developed by Spencer that linked families in different countries, cost a maximum of \$10,000.

“(But) it isn’t really the technology it’s about,” she said. “It’s about what could be done.”

Recent programs on WorldLink - which reaches 18 million homes across the country on channel 9410 on the DISH Network and 375 on DIRECTV - have focused on conflicts in the Middle East.

In the December special, “Afghan Women: Eyes on the Future,” the channel used digital video conferencing to link Islamic scholar and program moderator Farid Younos from the San Francisco studio with attendees of the Afghan Women’s Summit in Brussels.

In addition, summit participants Suria Paikan, of the United Nations Special Mission for Afghanistan, and Saha Saba, a member of the 24-year-old political group the Revolutionary Association for the Women of Afghanistan, responded to U.S. viewers who phoned in their opinions and questions to the show.

“Today the world thinks if (the rulers) are not Taliban, the issue in Afghanistan is solved, and this has really made me very sad,” said Saba in response to a comment by a caller identified as “Mark from Texas.”

“Afghanistan is still not free,” she said. “Don’t be deceived by (the) few women without burka (the traditional veil). Don’t be deceived by (the) few men without beards.”

Other programs include a call-in show with Arab American Institute Pres. James Zogby and the miniseries, “Arab Diaries,” which WorldLink obtained from First Run/Icarus Films.

Be it through original programming or purchased shows, WorldLink and InterAct serve as a platform for diverse points of view.

“TV shows are really the most powerful medium of our time,” Messinger said. “My biggest insight was if

you could engage people - not just have them sit there and listen - and participate in discussions, you could really transform the sort of way that Americans don’t really pay attention to what’s going on.”

Both WorldLink and InterAct are spinoffs of the Arcata-based Internews Network, which Spencer, Messinger and colleague David Hoffman started in 1982. The purpose of the network, which Hoffman still heads, was to create global understanding through media toward the end of the Cold War.

Messinger left in 1997 to start InterAct in San Rafael to further develop the two-way technology and find more uses for it. Spencer began WorldLink two years later with a \$120,000 development grant from the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation after the Federal Communications Commission required satellite networks to set aside channels for noncommercial, nonprofit organizations.

“Really this was a unique opportunity because of the few regulations and requirements to create public channels and WorldLink’s ability to get that license,” said Arthur Sussman, vice president for the MacArthur Foundation, which grants money to WorldLink through its \$180 million general fund.

The channel operates on a \$3 million budget funded largely by grants from institutions such as the MacArthur and Ford foundations.

“We had a lot of requests for documentaries and interesting programs, but not for establishing a TV station,” Sussman said. “I think the idea of having that as a place on TV where you can go and know with some certainty that you’re going to see programming international in scope is what we wanted to achieve.”

Public television stations from across the country have started requesting Worldlink’s programming, which the channel provides for free “because our mission is to get the stuff shown,” Spencer said.

WorldLink officials are now thinking of spinning off a music network that would carry the various music videos and shows now interspersed between documentaries, international news broadcasts and other programs.

The music channel would be on cable TV, which would offer more viewership. Proceeds from the for-profit channel would help fund WorldLink.

“We’ve looked for ways to be sustainable outside of the usual public broadcasting sources,” Spencer said. “Our valuable resource is our air time, and we’ve found that particularly with the music.”

He added that WorldLink is looking for investors for the spinoff, which he would like to launch in a year.