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## Arab news roundup gives U.S. insight into 'them'

By David Shaw

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the American news media were filled with attempts to answer the plaintive question, "Why do they hate us?"

Jamal Dajani, a Palestinian American businessman and self-described "news junkie," wanted to answer that question — or, at least, to give Americans some of the tools they'd need to find the answers themselves.

The news media are enormously influential in shaping people's views of cultures they don't experience firsthand, so Dajani wanted Americans to "have a window on the Middle East, to see and hear what 280 million people in 22 Arab countries see and hear about the United States in their homes and cafes every day on their local TV networks."

Today, Dajani's window is called "Mosaic," and it's open every day to the 19 million U.S. homes with satellite TV service. Until war broke out in Iraq, Dajani says, "we had reports from the Mideast on all the issues in the Mideast — the Palestine-Israel conflict, oil, women's rights, religion, water, everything.

"Since the war started, the war consumes the entire show."

"Mosaic" now provides a 30-minute nightly broadcast on the war in Iraq, based exclusively on

unfiltered excerpts from 15 networks in the Arab world and Israel.

Dajani is one of three men responsible for "Mosaic." One of the others is David Michaelis, born — like Dajani — in Jerusalem but, unlike Dajani, an Israeli. Both work for Kim Spencer, a former ABC producer, who's president of WorldLink TV, the San Francisco-based, nonprofit satellite network that produces and broadcasts "Mosaic."

Even before Sept. 11, Spencer says, he'd been thinking about how best to expose Americans to the Arab perspective as part of the mission he envisioned when he'd helped found WorldLink in 1999. That mission? "To link the United States to the rest of the world" by broadcasting in the United States foreign documentaries, cultural programming, music and news."

"There's a huge interest in the Arab world in having Americans hear their voices," Michaelis says. "The Arab world keenly watches CNN International ... but Americans focus only on their own media, and if there are subtitles or funny accents, they're just not interested. It's a dialogue of the clueless."

### An insular worldview

Because the United States has long been strong and secure and

relatively isolated, most media in this country have traditionally taken an insular view of the world, providing readers and viewers here with far less foreign news than is generally available to citizens of many other countries. In the 15 or 20 years leading up to Sept. 11, even that lean diet all but disappeared, and most Americans had become more clueless than ever about all foreign news, not just the Arab perspective.

In response to corporate demands for higher profits, amid increasingly fragmented audiences, local news and the latest scandal and newest celebrity came to dominate the media's attention. Overall foreign coverage plummeted by 70% to 80%, according to several studies. No wonder most Americans had no idea why "they" hated us. Or even who "they" were.

"It's a sort of cultural blockade," Michaelis says.

Michaelis, who worked in television in Jerusalem for 25 years, knew of Dajani through mutual friends, and amid the post-Sept. 11 turmoil, they and Spencer quickly came together to create "Mosaic" to try to break that blockade.

Arab networks were so eager to have their voices heard in the U.S. that they let WorldLink use their broadcasts free of charge. Two charitable groups — the John S. and James L. Knight and William and Flora Hewlett foundations —

immediately saw the public service value in “Mosaic.” Within six weeks of Sept. 11, “Mosaic” was on the air.

It now appears on DirecTV channel 375 and Dish Network channel 9410 at 6:30 p.m. daily and is repeated at 12:30 a.m., 6:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. There are three- to five-minute previews of each day’s show at 3 and 6 p.m.; other updates appear as events warrant.

Each night, “Mosaic” has reports — translated into English when necessary — from four to seven Mideast networks.

“We want Americans to see the whole thing — to get a feel for what it’s like to live in Syria or Lebanon or Iraq or Iran or Yemen,” Spencer says.

Contributors to “Mosaic” range from generally moderate outlets in Jordan and Abu Dhabi to the more politicized networks in Lebanon and Iran.

The political tone of the broadcasts often varies, depending on the individual newscaster — which serves to underscore WorldLink’s determination to “defy the notion of a single Arab perspective on regional and world events.”

### **A different side of the war**

Some of the Mideast broadcasts seem surprisingly similar to U.S. networks — complete with reports on the effect of the war on world stock markets, interviews with generals who second-guess U.S. military strategy and a news crawl across the bottom of the screen (albeit in Arabic).

Many broadcasts do, however, devote a far higher percentage of

their coverage than do American networks to antiwar protests around the world, and to civilian casualties and the bombing of non-military structures in Baghdad.

Not surprisingly, some Mideast newscasts are extremely critical of the American war effort.

One recent “Mosaic” report featured an Abu Dhabi TV reporter interviewing bloodied and bandaged women and children injured in the U.S. bombing of Baghdad. The interviews were conducted against the backdrop of destroyed homes and in a hospital.

“Do you know what America is doing to Iraq right now?” the Abu Dhabi TV announcer asked one young girl, lying in her hospital bed.

“They are hitting it,” she replied.

Then the announcer concluded his report:

“In a matter of minutes, the peaceful life of the Iraqi children was transformed into a hell.... Now the parents of the children are asking, ‘Who has weapons of mass destruction — Iraq or those who are killing the children of Iraq?’”

“Mosaic” executives say they’ve had no complaints about this kind of coverage.

But they heard “many complaints,” Dajani says, when “Mosaic” initially chose not to run the first footage from Iraqi television that showed U.S. casualties and prisoners of war.

“People protested that we were succumbing to what the U.S. government wanted, instead of doing what we said we’d do — show Americans what people in Arab countries were seeing,” Dajani says.

“But I made my decision as a father. If my son — God forbid — was killed or taken prisoner, I would not want that on TV.”

Once the families of the servicemen were notified and other networks aired the footage, so did “Mosaic.”

Although Dajani and his colleagues clearly realize the importance of war coverage now, I had the clear sense from our conversations that they miss the opportunity they previously had to present a more varied and nuanced Mideast report.

Dajani and Michaelis — who function, in effect, as co-producers of “Mosaic” — come from opposite sides of the seemingly unbridgeable Israel-Palestine gap, and I think they feel that because their exposure to each others’ views has enabled them to work together as friends and colleagues, they might be able to contribute in some small way to a broader understanding of that gap among other Americans by providing as much unfiltered information as possible on what viewers in the Mideast are exposed to every day.

After all, as Spencer says, “the Israel-Palestine situation is the real issue to most folks in the Middle East.”