

VARIETY

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U.S. audiences land Link to world perspective

By Elizabeth Guiger

HOLLYWOOD Bill Cosby has a point. I caught him the other night on channel 375 on my DirecTV dial, an area of the spectrum I confess I don't ordinarily run home and click on. He was espousing the virtues of a service called World Link TV.

For all those who complain that there's little to watch in the summer and that few shows ever illuminate what's happening around the world, heed Cosby's pitch and take a look at what's on this channel.

During a three-hour period last week I caught a hard-hitting docu that explored the alleged murder by the Taliban of some 7,000 rag-tag prisoners-of-war in the aftermath of the American assault on Mazar-i-Sharif, the Afghanistan town in which the American Taliban supporter John Walker Lindh was apprehended.

The producers of the show (apparently British and Australian) implicate the U.S. military for doing nothing to stop the atrocities. (The U.S. military's on-camera response: "We're looking into it.")

Following that, and perhaps as an antidote to it, was a poignant piece focused on art historian Dan Cruikshank's travels to Afghanistan in 2002 to explore what was left of the country's cultural and artistic heritage.

With a lone cameraman and a translator, Cruikshank travels to Banyan, the remote site where three massive Buddhas were blown up by the Taliban in 2001. We climb with him into the still-impressive indentations where the statues stood and view from within the priceless frescos that miraculously remained intact.

Then I got caught up in a show about "rai," a popular music tradition (think Paul Anka meets Bob Dylan) orig-

inating in Algeria. The hourlong show, produced by the Franco-German channel Arte, told me more about the shifts in Mideast musical tastes — and in politics — than, well, I could have found anywhere on American television.

The producers suggest that had successive regimes in Algeria been more receptive to the aspirations of artists there, and by extension the hordes of young people who idolized them as liberating influences, Muslim fundamentalism might never have taken hold.

So where does all this global insight come from?

WorldLink, it turns out, is a unit of a nonprofit org based in San Francisco called Link Media Inc., and bills itself as "the first nationwide network providing Americans with global perspectives on news, events and culture."

It also airs a half-hour collage, called "Mosaic," of unedited newscasts from Mideast countries, revoiced in English, as well as foreign feature films and world music docs.

On its advisory board sit progressives, human rights activists and showbizzers like Harry Belafonte, New York Dept. of Consumer Affairs topper Gretchen Dykstra and Independent TV Service associate director Judy Tam.

Launched in December 1999, the channel is available in 20 million U.S. homes via satellite.

Relying as it does on grants from foundations and donations from an obviously limited public, there's no telling how long such a service can thrive in an increasingly right-wing media landscape.

World Link's Web site claims that 90% of what's seen on its air is first-run in the U.S., and there's little reason to doubt it. I'm not saying this fare is easygoing — or that I'm swearing off primetime series or the occasional peek at reality wonders like "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." Worthiness can be wearying.

But for those moments when you're ready to confront that nagging post-9/11 question — "Why do they hate us so much?" — this is one of the few places where you might just find out.