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THE LARGEST DAILY CIRCULATION IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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Daily radio broadcasts from Pakistan's earthquake zone, where 250,000 people are still in tents, was made possible by Internews Network in Arcata. (Photo: Ivan Sigal / Internews Network)

From Arcata comes a vision of independent media worldwide – and a belief that a free flow of information can help avert war

By Jessica Werner

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

ARCATA, Humboldt County – Nagorno-Karabakh, the little-known disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is awfully far from decidedly peaceful Humboldt County.

But when longtime Humboldt resident and press-freedom advocate David Hoffman discusses the critical role media access has played in this and other war zones, his casual familiarity and first-hand knowledge of the region make it seem as nearby as neighboring Eureka.

“The civil war began when Azerbai-

jan shut down the Armenian-language television station,” says Hoffman during a lunchtime interview-cum-history lesson in Arcata’s quiet town square. “It’s the same thing that precipitated the siege of Sarajevo when (former President Slobodan) Milosevic turned around the television transmitters so people didn’t have access to news – not to mention radio’s infamous role in fomenting violence in Rwanda. The longer I work on media issues, the clearer it is that the free flow of information is critical to avoiding war.”

Just a few blocks away, in a converted car dealership garage, is the bustling headquarters of Internews

Network, the nonprofit organization Hoffman founded 24 years ago to promote the development of independent media all over the world. From this unlikely hamlet, Internews has made its global presence known, growing from a modest coalition of idealistic antinuclear activists and video artists to one of the world’s most successful and well-funded media-development enterprises. With a budget last year of \$27 million in government and private grants and donations, Internews has staff working in 50 countries, with an increased presence in the Middle East and broader Arab world since Sept. 11, 2001.

Hoffman, 61, traces the success of Internews to its first media initiative in 1982, when he and Internews co-founders Kim Spencer and Evelyn Messinger were working out of a house in San Francisco. They had the breakthrough idea of linking U.S. and Soviet audiences through two-way live satellite videoconferences – called “spacebridges” – and, they hoped, thawing the Cold War in high-tech, peacenik fashion. When all lines of communication between the two countries was either dead or bristling with propaganda, these Internews television communiqués made history, leading to a partnership with ABC News, which ran a series of Emmy-winning spacebridges moderated by Peter Jennings.

“It was the first time Soviets and Americans got to hear uncensored discussions of real-life things about each other on television,” says Hoffman, whose own political convictions were forged as a Vietnam draft resistor and ‘70s labor organizer.

Today, Internews spreads its message – “access to information empowers people everywhere” – through education in the field. It trains as many as 8,000 media professionals worldwide each year with “Journalism 101” lessons in interviewing, broadcasting and ethics.

“Media is so ubiquitous in America that we take it for granted,” Hoffman says. “It’s like turning on your tap and water comes out. You turn on your radio and you expect to hear music or commentary. But there are large portions of the world where people have no credible information whatsoever, and it’s no surprise that these tend to be the same areas where there is endemic poverty, injustice and a lack of democracy.”

Hoffman’s optimism comes at a peculiar moment, when most media pundits are talking about a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West, not a shared vision of pluralistic public opinion. Interviewed in Arcata while the Arab world was aflame with protests over the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish press, Hoffman remained unfazed, dis-

missing the violence with the famous dictum that “freedom of speech doesn’t mean you can yell fire in a crowded theater.” Describing the dramatic recent growth of independent media in Pakistan, where state-run television ruled the airwaves until 1999, Jeanne Bourgault, Internews chief operating officer, says: “It’s really hard to put the genie back in the bottle once it’s gotten out.”

Privately operated television now reaches 53 million Pakistanis, and independent broadcasters played a vital role in coverage of the October earthquake in Pakistan.



Internews Network

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However, the success of Internews in Afghanistan provides the most dramatic example of how an influx of foreign aid – \$4 million from the U.S. Agency for International Development – and ambition can transform an obliterated media landscape from the ground up.

“There was a total media vacuum in Afghanistan when we went in after the Taliban fell in 2002, because it had been a criminal offense to own mass-media technology in the country,” Bourgault says. Four years later, Internews has trained more than 800 Afghan journalists, and the country’s media outlets have exploded: 350 magazines and newspapers, and 68 television and radio stations now operate. Most of them are free of government control. Twenty-nine independent radio

stations broadcast the Internews-produced program “Salaam Watander” (“Hello Citizen”), which reaches 43 percent of the country’s population with news, music, children’s shows and features on women’s issues and human rights. Such success stories belie the challenges Internews staffers can face when exporting their thoroughly democratic model of media participation into state-controlled environments. After 10 years of work in Uzbekistan, Internews (along with the BBC) was banned in October 2005 from working in the country during a broad nationwide crackdown on foreign nongovernmental organizations. Two Internews employees were criminally convicted in Uzbekistan’s capital city of Tashkent of conspiracy to produce unlicensed TV programming and illegal publishing, accusations they vigorously deny. Internews receives 70 percent of its funding from the U.S. government – the majority from USAID, with supplementary grants from State Department arms such as the Bush administration’s 4-year-old Middle East Partnership Initiative. Yet, as Hoffman says, “we receive this government money to create nongovernmental media.”

“We’ve received a lot of funding from Democratic and Republican administrations,” Hoffman says. “It makes for some strange bedfellows.”

Actor Michael Douglas, George Soros’ Open Society Institute, the Dow Jones Company, and Republicans Rep. Mitch McConnell and Rep. Jim Leach are among Internews’ supporters, as well as the governments of 13 foreign countries. Internews does not accept funding from the Pentagon, and Hoffman says Internews resists any pressure to do the U.S. government’s bidding.

“Recently, someone (in the U.S. State Department) in Afghanistan demanded we run radio public-service announcements on the radio for capturing bin Laden. And we had to say, ‘That’s not our role.’ We give people the tools to broadcast the messages they deem important. But the government has been pretty good about keeping their hands off.”