

The New York Times

Students Compare Notes on Life in Iraq and America

By JULIE SALAMON

Published: October 6, 2004

MTV, the cable network whose "Real World" invented modern reality television, is offering its young viewers a dose of the real world - lowercase, big picture.

On "Chat the Planet: Baghdad 2-Way," which was broadcast on Monday night and will be repeated throughout the month (see mtv.com for times), 9 college students from Baghdad and 12 from Ohio talked to one another via satellite television about politics and war, school and parents.

One lesson was quickly conveyed: appearances are deceiving. The students seemed remarkably similar in dress, hairstyles and polite manner, although the American group was more diverse, including black students and those whose parents are from Syria and India .

But the Iraqis, all of whom spoke fluent English, soon dispelled the notion that their daily concerns were the same as the Americans'. A 21-year-old dental student named Yvonne, wearing carefully applied makeup and blond streaks in her hair, described her life: "I cannot go to college safely. I cannot go out. I'm a girl. I'm afraid to be kidnapped. I'm afraid to be raped. I'm afraid to be taken away and not returned back."

By contrast, Seth Kujat, a 22-year-old senior at Kent State University in Kent , Ohio , offered this description of his daily life: "There's not a whole lot we have to worry about. Worry about getting up on time to make class, finding time to hang out with your friends and go to bars after class."

Another stark difference was not visible to audiences in the United States: the program will not be seen in Baghdad, as originally planned, because Iraqi participants could become the targets of death threats, said Laurie Meadoff , one of the producers, in an interview. "We had to pull it off because of the danger to the kids if they're caught participating with Americans," she said. (No last names are given for the same reason.) The program was originally intended to be broadcast in Iraq and other Arab countries via Middle Eastern Broadcasting Corporation, based in Dubai .

When it came time to tape the conversation on Sept. 14, Ms. Meadoff said, the situation in Baghdad had become so dangerous that her company, NextNext Entertainment , did not use its usual production partner, a South African company, but an all-Iraqi crew. Two days before the taping, The Associated Press reported that the death toll throughout the country reached 59 on that day, and nearly 200 people were wounded, more than half of those in Baghdad . During the taping, two car bombings occurred just blocks from the studio, forcing the students to move.

American viewers watched with the usual interruptions - commercials for cellphones, potato chips, computer games and sanitary napkins.

On the program the war was Topic A. Sura, a 24-year-old computer programmer, said the United States had no right to invade her country. "No force at all can do this to any country," she said. Later, she posed a hypothetical situation: "An exterior force considers Bush as a criminal and wants to occupy America or have the same war in America ." She asked the Ohio students how they would feel about that.

Tony Cox, a 20-year-old Republican leader on campus who is enrolled in the R.O.T.C., said: "That's a fair question. But you have to understand that President Bush is not lining people up in front of mass graves and

shooting them." Later he added, "I would accept an occupation if my ruler who was just deposed was a murderous tyrant."

Mr. Kujat had another response: "I would hate it. I'd probably feel exactly the way you guys do. Where does it stop? Where does our government stop?"

On the subject of Iraqi elections, scheduled for January, a 21-year-old dental student named Ahmed questioned the validity of American-style democracy in his country. "We have learned from the history of the world that every society has to create its own democracy," he said. "We can't just apply American democracy and let it work."

The level of discourse reflected the existence of thoughtful students - and careful casting. The producers chose Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and Kurds on the Iraqi side; Republicans, Democrats and undecideds on the American side. The American students spent three days in workshops discussing issues before they spoke to the Iraqis for two and a half hours, a conversation edited to 22 minutes.

Interviewed by e-mail after the show, Meena, a 21-year-old student from Baghdad, said: "The Americans were so nice. They are like us, from the general people. They have nothing to do with the war."

Amy Baker, a 19-year-old student at Ohio State University in Columbus, was chosen to take part because a childhood friend of hers was a soldier killed in Iraq this spring. "I learned more about foreign policy, the war in Iraq in the three days I worked on this than I have in any classroom," she said.