

War coverage takes over as top Internet search

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28 March 2003

“War” has taken over “sex”, “Britney Spears” and “travel” as the top Internet search term since the US and British forces commenced their bombardment of Iraq.

Given the global, 24-hour character of the Internet the rise in numbers looking for news on the latest developments in Iraq is hardly surprising. That alone does not account for the increase, however, which more fundamentally expresses the frustration of millions of people with official news outlets. Their unashamed regurgitation of government propaganda forces people to search for other news sources outside of the usual channels.

The UK Internet Service Provider (ISP), Freeserve, which tracks daily changes in popular search terms, said that over the weekend of March 22-23, the term “war” outranked previous favourites.

According to the ISP, news sites are seeing a huge increase in traffic as people look for the latest information on Iraq. Some sites are recording more than two to three times more visitors than normal. According to Comscore Media Metrix, traffic to the top 15 news sites has increased by more than 40 percent.

Yahoo! is experiencing the same trend with “Iraq” claiming the top place in its search index. The war now generates more interest than music and basketball, with searches involving military technology also on the increase.

Keynote Systems, which tracks how long it takes web users to access sites, said that the Internet and the web as a whole were not showing any major problems, but the company did find accessing some sites difficult. The web sites of the US Navy and US Airforce, and the British Home Office could not be accessed for several hours last week and the sites of CNN and MSNBC were down for a few minutes after the US attack began,

but quickly recovered. Other sites affected included the London *Times* and *Jerusalem Post*, which suffered from performance degradation, according to Keynote.

The responsiveness of BBC News Online suffered during the busy lunchtime period with average download times rising from 0.47 seconds to 1.88 seconds and ITV News saw average download times increase from 5.66 seconds to 15.84 seconds.

The Arabic-language satellite station Al Jazeera which broadcast Saddam Hussein’s address in full following the start of bombing last week has also had problems. Its web page took 240 seconds to load the night war commenced.

Akamai Technologies distributes data from leading news sites. On March 19, Akamai had its largest spike ever with traffic to clients reaching 370,000 hits per second, up from the previous peak of 290,000 which was attained earlier in the week. According to president Paul Sagan, Akamai added large amounts of data storage and transmission capacity to the network in anticipation of an increase in Internet usage during the war. The company claims it could easily handle a tenfold increase in traffic. Customers include CNN, Yahoo! and MSNBC.

Yahoo!’s news site—which established itself by allowing submissions from independent news sources—saw about three times more traffic than it would in a typical hour directly after President George W. Bush’s speech announcing that the US had launched war on Iraq, according to spokeswoman Joanna Stevens.

Stevens said surfers were also using more targeted searches after Bush’s speech. The top search terms on Yahoo! in the 15 minutes after the speech were: Iraq, George W. Bush, world map, Ari Fleischer, Saddam Hussein and war, she said.

In the Gulf War of 1991, governments relied on the self-censorship practised by the official media to prevent working people from learning the truth about the war. Twelve years on the same media is even more craven in its parroting of the lies emanating from Washington and Downing Street. But their ability to chloroform public opinion has been seriously undermined with the emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web as a mass medium.

Of most concern to the British and US governments is the fact that the Internet is not simply a repository for news and information but an active tool of communication and organisation. The emergence of thousands of antiwar sites and mailing lists has aided the co-ordination of protest actions on an international scale.



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