

Web sites slow to a crawl

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Fear. High levels of alerts. Terror.

The Internet is crawling with anxiety today as Web users worldwide hunt for news or, in untold thousands of cases, e-mail family members who live or work in the areas of the country under siege.

The nation's primary Internet providers are "under a heightened state of alert" today because of communications bottlenecks that occurred nationwide this morning, said David J. Koch, the president of Fiber Network Solutions on the North Side.

"It's pretty surreal, isn't it? The emotions I'm experiencing range from wanting to cry to incredible anger," he said.

The privately held Fiber Network is one of 40 major companies that form the Internet's infrastructure in the United States. It serves primarily Internet Service Providers, Web-hosting companies and other business enterprises in the Great Lakes region.

Internet infrastructure for the next several weeks will remain "a critical issue, because we don't know if we've seen the last of this," Koch said, referring to potentially more terrorist attacks.

The heaviest of today's internet traffic was directed at Web servers for the major news outlets. CNN.com, MSNBC.com, Yahoo News, ABCNews.com and FoxNews.com all were slowed, as was Dispatch.com

"We're serving it out as fast as we can and people are still coming," Dispatch Internet Services Manager Dan Black said of Dispatch.com.

MSNBC.com spokesman Ben Billingsley said that Webmasters there expected traffic demands to be "enormous, but right now tabulating audience isn't a priority."

Despite the congestion around news sites, "traffic on the Net

overall was lower than usual," Fiber Network's chief technology officer Kyle Bacon said.

Overall traffic volumes were below normal -- in part because of the terrorist attacks, the men said.

"No one was at eBay or Amazon.com," Koch said.

"People were not doing what they usually do," Bacon added, noting that many workers left their desks to watch TV or make phone calls.

If Web traffic ever were to threaten to overwhelm the nation's communications infrastructure, the federal government could take over U.S. backbone operations such as Fiber Network to keep essential Internet services operating nationwide.

"Our priority is to provide communications access first to safety forces, police, fire and government agencies," Koch said.

"We may be under obligations of eminent domain. We are conducting ourselves accordingly."

To prepare, Koch said, his company has prioritized its customer base. It would, if necessary, curtail service to those whose Internet access is deemed inessential to national interests.

Cellphone use also congested the airwaves nationwide, carriers reported.

"There have been some situations where the system has overloaded," said Laura Merritt, a Verizon Wireless spokeswoman at the company's Dublin office.

"The networks are operating fine, it's just that everybody is trying to reach their loved ones. It's an overload."

Verizon asks customers to curtail their cellphone use "unless it's an emergency," Merritt said.

"We want to keep the system open as much as possible for those who need to make calls."