

Networking: Search term faves emerge

December 19 2005

Back in the early 1990s, when the Internet first emerged as a cultural phenomenon, technology gurus reckoned that a brilliant new intellectual era was here and that Americans would soon be able to search for all sorts of sophisticated information online. Just over a decade later, it turns out, the most popular search subjects include the Cartoon Network, Paris Hilton and Jessica Simpson, experts tell United Press International's Networking.

"People are fixated on the activities of pop culture icons," said Erik Gunther, an index expert at Yahoo!, the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based company that pioneered online searches.

Yahoo, AOL and others have compiled lists of the top search terms for 2005, and, generally, the trend across these different search engines seems the same. "Everyone on the list this year had success either in music, film, or television, so it appears that people this year are looking more at talent than controversy," said Gunther.

The top five search subjects on Yahoo! for 2005 were Britney Spears, 50 Cent, The Cartoon Network, Mariah Carey and Green Day.

The story was somewhat similar at America Online. Hotel heiress, socialite, actress, author and "all-around entrepreneur" Paris Hilton was the most searched celebrity in 2005 on AOL. Last year she came in second behind Britney Spears, and in 2003 she was third behind 50 Cent and Britney. After hovering in the No. 1 or No. 2 spot for four years running, Britney slipped in searches in 2005, according to AOL, based in

Dulles, Va.

"Millions of people search online through AOL Search for a wide spectrum of things," said Jim Riesenbach, senior vice president of AOL search and directional media. "The most searched for topics online during 2005 are a reflection of what was top of mind or what people wanted to find more information about."

The popular search engines are apparently evolving in the imagination of the U.S. public as an all-electronic version of People Magazine or US Magazine, sources of titillating, but ultimately almost useless, information. "Shocking as it may seem, but the same general themes emerged back in the mid-90s when I worked at Excite," Faith Sedlin, a spokeswoman for the classified search engine Oodle.com told Networking.

To find more serious information, experts say, consumers have turned to what are called "vertical" search engines. That is, narrowly tailored sites that can help them find specific information. Along those lines, LexisNexis.com has become a go-to location for news for consumers and business professionals alike.

A survey of 1,500 adults in November by LexisNexis, made available to Networking in advance of its release later today, indicates that the most talked about news stories of 2005 included Hurricane Katrina, with 97 percent of the vote; the temporary spike in gas prices, with 88 percent of the vote; the war in Iraq, with 83 percent of the vote; the tsunami in Asia with 62 percent of the vote; the terrorist attacks on London, with 36 percent of the vote; the U.S. Supreme Court nominations, with 35 percent of the vote; and the forced dehydration of comatose Terri Schiavo, 33 percent.

"What is changing is that users are reaching out more and more to

vertical search engines to fulfill their more specific needs," said Sedlin of Oodle.com. "Vertical sites tend to be more focused."

At Oodle, during 2005 the most popular searches were for housing, pets, cars, jobs and furniture. The site aggregates listings from an array of sources, including eBay.com and newspaper classifieds and has experienced an increase in traffic volume since its launch in February.

In addition to subjects and celebrities, searches for words are increasingly common online, and the major search engines sell access to most searched words for a fee.

According to Merriam-Webster.com, the word "integrity" topped the online dictionary's most searched term for 2005. "What does this mean?" asked Scott Lorenz, president of Westwind Communications, a marketing firm based in Plymouth, Mich. "It indicates to me that there must be a lack of integrity in our society and that people are seeking the definition because we don't have enough examples of it in our daily lives. I believe it is very telling about our concern for values in our society, and is worthy of pausing to take note."

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