

The Web: Searching for survivors online

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The New Orleans Police and the Louisiana National Guard have an electronic ally in their search for survivors of Hurricane Katrina: the Internet, experts tell UPI's The Web.

Individuals are using the Web to search for lost loved ones and view satellite images of damaged property, and content producers and Internet Service Providers have launched a registry for survivors of the catastrophic storm.

"Everyone needs to help," said Paul Robinson, producer of KatrinaSurvivorHelp.org, one such site, based in Los Angeles. "As one person trying to deal with this catastrophe, I can do little. But there are many people out there who know of someone. We just need to collect the information in one place, accessible by anyone."

Robinson said he got the idea for the site from the fact that many missing persons are calling hotels, but the hoteliers did not have the capacity on their reservation systems to keep that kind of information from survivors. The site is looking to partner with an in-bound call center that has operators who can take the messages from those who made it out of the disaster area and enter it into a database, which will be made accessible through the Web.

The site is also looking to work with volunteers at homeless shelters along the Gulf Coast to help them catalog the names of survivors.

"Volunteer proxies can simply gather information from the survivor and post it on the Web site," said Don Bledsoe, who co-produces the site

with Robinson.

One of the nation's leading Web content search firms, Lycos Inc., based in Waltham, Mass., is compiling a search category of other sites that are listing information from and about survivors of Katrina. The search engine says that any PC user can search for missing people by name and can reference other sites that are providing rescue services in the wake of the storm. Thirty-five missing-persons sites have been collected and linked by Lycos.com at lycos.com/Katrina/.

The company has also developed a special section of its property, Wired News, located at wired.com/news/hurricane/, to provide non-stop coverage of Katrina and the rebuilding effort, the company said.

For the week ending Sept. 3 Hurricane Katrina was the most researched term, followed by poker, Labor Day, Britney Spears, Pamela Anderson, the NFL, New Orleans, perennial favorite Paris Hilton, Neopets and something called "Dragonball."

"Hurricane Katrina takes over the top spot on the Lycos 50 (index), dominating Web searches and causing a surge in search activity for other, hurricane-related topics," said Lycos. "Katrina becomes the most-searched Hurricane in the history of the Internet. No other hurricane, with the exception of Hurricane Floyd, which hit number one in September 1999, has generated the amount of search activity that Katrina currently sees."

What's more, Katrina is the most-searched news event since the terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists on Sept. 11, 2001. Charitable organizations are also seeing their search numbers skyrocket because of the storm. "Search activity has risen by more than 2,000 percent for the Red Cross," said a Lycos spokesman. "The aftermath of Katrina has also caused a rise in search activity for housing searches, up 555 percent."

This includes sites like OpenMyHouse.org, KatrinaHousing.org and KatrinaHomes.com. "Searches for satellite map images of before and after shots of the affected areas of Hurricane Katrina have also jumped more than 300 percent over the last week," Lycos said.

The federal government has stepped up its involvement in the recovery process. President Bush yesterday summoned congressional leaders to the White House for a meeting, then sent several Cabinet officials to the Capitol to brief other members about his plan to provide \$40 billion for the next stage of the Katrina recovery effort.

"Bureaucracy is not going to stand in the way of getting the job done for the people," Bush told journalists.

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