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Networks Faced Test In Capital

By DONNA HOWELL

"Our capacity remains undiminished," Barack Obama said of America in his inaugural speech.

But the nation's tech communications were sure tested Tuesday.

As a crowd estimated at 2 million swelled in the capital, testing cellular networks, many more viewers flocked online — and some had to struggle to find a working streaming video feed to watch the new president's swearing-in. CNN.com said it broke a record for its video viewers.

Elsewhere, blog updates lagged at crucial moments, and 1.4 billion text and multimedia messages were expected to be sent during the day, 27% more than average.

Communications providers had spent months getting ready.

"This is the largest gathering of Americans in history, and certainly of wireless subscribers," **Sprint Nextel** (S) spokesman John Taylor said from Washington, D.C.

In the D.C. market, Sprint Nextel saw its voice, text and data service traffic more than triple from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. EST, leading up to the noon swearing-in. Taylor says some customers experienced a few very minor delays.

The firm added temporary base radio stations to cell towers to boost the Sprint network capacity around Washington by 40% and the Nextel network, used by a lot of emergency services workers, by 90%.

VeriSign (VRSN), which helps mobile messaging operate among providers, expected that messages in North America would rise from analysts' estimate of 1.1 billion a day to 1.4 billion on Inauguration Day. The firm kept conference bridges open with carriers Tuesday so operation teams could troubleshoot any issue. "We certainly haven't seen it so far. . . . We've already been through some of the peak traffic hours," said Charles Landry, a vice president in VeriSign's messaging division, after the swearing-in.

Twitter, a social networking and blogging service based on short text messages, says it got five times its normal tweets per second around the time of Obama's swearing-in.

At one point, says Twitter co-founder Biz Stone, some Twitter users experienced delays of two to five minutes in getting updates, but he says the system caught up fast.

"We'll be looking at this critically so that during the next big event there will be no delay at the peak," he said via e-mail.

On Tuesday, messaging providers appeared to have fewer issues than Webcasters' streaming video did. For instance, some viewers who tried to watch the inaugural address live at CNN.com saw the message "You made it!

However, so did everyone else. This message means you've got your place in line to join our watch party."

CNN said that from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. EST, CNN.com Live served more than 18.8 million live video streams, shattering its streaming record of 5.3 million, set on Election Day.

The inauguration "was likely the largest online streaming event ever," said Shawn White, director of external operations at Web performance tracker **Keynote Systems** (KEYN).


Keynote saw significant slowdowns at such news sites as those of ABC, CBS, Fox, the Los Angeles Times, MSNBC and NPR.

"We also saw (traffic running) about two times slower at the White House Web site, whitehouse.gov," White said.

At the worst, the site took more than a minute to load — 16 times slower than normal, he says, and the Senate's site would not load for 60% to 70% of visitors at the peak.

Expect more texting with Obama, an avid BlackBerry user, in the Oval Office. His team likes to text supporters. What he and his team are doing is "taking what the big boys — Pepsi, Coke and all those — are doing with mobile marketing" and applying that to the presidency, said Shane Neman, chief executive at business text messaging provider EzTexting.com.

Obama's inaugural committee invited visitors to the inauguration Web site, pic2009.org, to "text HISTORY to 56333" to sign up for updates about inaugural activities. And the inaugural ball later Tuesday was planned to be "linked with other parties around the country through interactive technology," according to an Obama blog.

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