

The SL-9/ESO Web Encounter

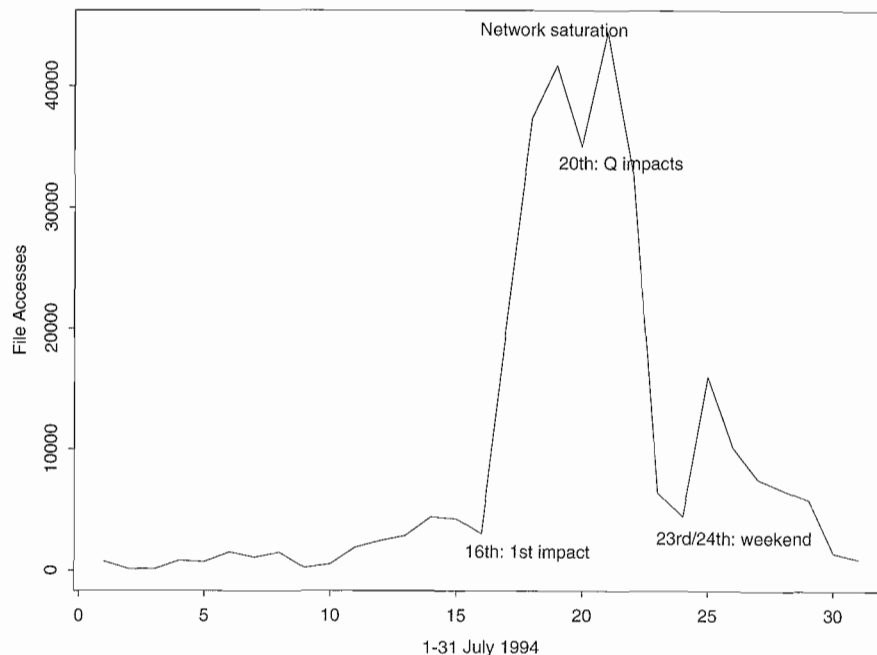
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The ESO Information System on the World-Wide Web (address: <http://www.hq.eso.org/eso-homepage.html>) was very much in the firing line during the Jupiter/Shoemaker-Levy 9 event. It was Monday morning, July 18, after the first impacts, when the WWW server collapsed with 250 simultaneous users, compared to a more usual figure of 10 before that. More simultaneous users were permitted, even if this meant that the system slowed to a halt. So it was to remain for many days.

The graph shows the impact caused locally, from July 16. "File accesses" includes the ornamental files – icons and so on. These are generally small, so they can be discounted in the number of bytes transferred. By Tuesday July 19, we were touching on a transfer of 0.7 GB. On Wednesday there was a slackening off. The intense media interest in the Q impacts led to a new high on Thursday.

About 5 to 6% of the intense traffic was local in origin. The largest national affiliations of users of the ESO Web at that time (as derived from the email addresses of users) were (1) Germany – 80,000; (2) USA educational, commercial and governmental – 73,500; (3) ESO Garching and La Silla – 17,000; and (4) France – 12,000. Distribution of data by anonymous FTP also took place on a heroic scale. In addition, there were animations, and material was made available in many different forms, to cater for the unquenchable thirst of the television crews, the in-

ESO WWW Server during SL-9 event: Daily Accesses



terested public, and astronomers for visual information.

Other sites experienced similar impacts from SL-9. The Shoemaker-Levy homepage at JPL recently (early September) reported that their access count since mid-July had passed the 2 million mark. Commercial information

providers also saturated when faced with the new requirements to deliver images and text, colourfully and fast. By July 27, on CompuServe (ESO's press releases appear in the Astronomy Forum), 37 observatories had material available, with 25.3 GB of data being downloaded during the "comet week".

The Comet, Jupiter, and Everything: SL-9 and the Media – a Strictly Personal Impression

R. ALBRECHT, ST-ECF, Garching

It is not often that Richard West shows up in my office. "Don't plan on getting sick next week", he said. What had happened? The number of registrations for the media event at the occasion of the impact of fragment A had exceeded 100.

With just a few days to go, gigantic trucks had started to appear behind the ESO building, deploying huge dishes and pointing them at the sky. Bundles of cables were running down the circuitous hallways of the ESO building, camera positions were constructed in the auditorium and in the remote control room.

We were starting to get nervous. With the observers on La Silla we were just a few astronomers facing what in the end turned out to be about 120 media representatives. And

remember, at that time we were not at all sure that we were going to see anything spectacular. Dim memories of the Comet Kohoutek media disaster in 1974 came to our minds.

With the help of many of our colleagues, the ESO infrastructure was moulded into a support system for the event. The Council Room was turned into a press centre. The speaker system in the auditorium was connected to the telephone for remote call-in. A huge crane lifted a telescope onto the roof of the ESO building. Gotta have a telescope if you are an observatory, right? The idea was to connect a TV camera to the telescope and show the image in the auditorium.

And then they came. The serious representatives of government TV and the agile oper-

ators from the private stations; respected science writers and people from tabloid newspapers. Lights, camera, action! What will we see? We told you, we don't know. What will happen to Jupiter? Nothing. What will happen to the Earth? Nothing. What will happen to the comet? Crash! What would happen to the Earth if it were hit by the comet. Crash!

"Would you be available for a comment during a 30-second newsbreak following the impact?" one of the private operators was asking. "Sure", I said. Big mistake. They dragged me into the remote control room; they had established a phone link to Sutherland Observatory; the newsflash started exactly at the theoretical time of the impact; the reporter on the phone says to David Laney down in Suther-