

The World Wide Web World Cup is a whole new ball game

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There is a feeding frenzy on the web. The most unlikely organisations are using the month-long window of opportunity afforded by this year's World Cup to make their mark as the fervour of football fans approaches fever pitch.

I found an ad on one website called "Jesus and the World Cup". The ad is subtitled "Find Lasting Peace in Jesus No Matter who wins the World Cup". They may have a point. Especially about the Peace.

Fears of terror attacks make this year's event a paranoic's paradise.

FrontPage magazine is calling the tournament "The World Cup of Terror" as contingency plans as grand as those made in preparation for an imminent hurricane are being hatched in Germany.

British officials are afraid for soccer fans who could become the latest target of terrorist groups: Timesonline reports that police are searching for a "chemical vest" that may be detonated by a suicide bomber in a crowded venue "such as a pub full of people watching an England World Cup match".

The host nation has an unfortunate historical association with terrorism because of the Palestinian attacks on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in the Bavarian capital, where 11 Israeli athletes were killed. NATO has put 24 surveillance planes on standby to help protect the World Cup against a terrorist attack from the skies.

There is also a strong right-wing contingent which could inspire racist violence in a country still plagued with the slur of Nazism.

If anything untoward were to happen, unprecedented coverage of the event would ensure that billions of people worldwide would know about it.

2002 World Cup coverage reached a conservatively audited 28.8 billion people. Will 2006 boast even higher figures? No one seems to be risking even a ballpark figure.

And for good reason. Media applications have become so diverse in the past four years that monitoring them is a nearly impossible task. Traditional methods of media measurement, that used to determine advertisers preferences, are becoming obsolete. The focus is no longer solely on the beautiful game but on all the extras associated with football culture, and a strong dose of web culture in the mix. Many companies, completely at sea in the deluge of possibilities offered for advertising to potential consumers, will be using The Cup to try and fill in the blanks about what today's consumers really want.

This year a large proportion of coverage will be provided by the viewers themselves. "One of the key differences with new media relative to old media is that it allows people to participate," says media-analyst Phil Leigh of Inside Digital Media Inc.

There is not a little social engineering happening here. The aim of the experiment is to make people feel as if they belong to a global community while they are actually being lured into providing content for websites. Yahoo!, which manages FIFA's website has put one in the net by including interactive features — blogs, chats and contests alongside three- to five-minute video highlights following each of the tournament's 64 games.

After the showdown, many users will be able to post Yahoo! on their CVs as a previous employer.

I'm not saying that interactive media is a bad thing, just know that what they really want you to do is to eat media and then, like an Overeaters Anonymous subscriber, report to them exactly how much you have eaten of what, and when and whether you enjoyed it or not, while possibly losing out on those real soccer moments shared with your real mates or in the company of real, live fans of the game at a live match.

Soccer, the most popular game in the world, has been responsible in the past for starting wars and ending them. The motto of World Cup 2006 is "A Time to Make Friends". Let's hope! © Debbie smit — The Sunday Independent