LOCAL NEWS: Rockford

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By MELISSA WESTPHAL, Rockford Register Star


Thursday, May 22, 2003

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ROCKFORD — Controversy surrounding New York Times reporter Chris Hedges’ antiwar speech at Rockford College extended beyond the Rock River Valley Tuesday.

Readers from across the globe responded to Tuesday’s Rockford Register Star article after it was posted on the Drudge Report, an international online news site that gained fame for breaking news during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

More than 400 e-mails and dozens of phone calls inundated the Rockford Register Star newsroom in response to the article, which detailed Hedges’ antiwar sentiments and audience reaction during Saturday’s commencement ceremony.

The Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter was booed off the stage after his abbreviated 18-minute speech. He compared United States’ policy in Iraq to piranhas and tyranny over the weak.

Some audience members and graduates turned their backs to the speech while others blew foghorns in protest.

The local story prompted reaction from readers who supported Hedges’ rights of free speech and others who said the college owes graduates and their families a decent apology.
Reporters from Los Angeles, Washington, New York, Fox News and other Illinois media outlets called the Register Star to confirm details. They asked for permission to reprint the story.

Page views for Tuesday’s article on rrstar.com increased from 386 to 20,321 between 9 and 10 a.m. after the Drudge Report linked to the Register Star’s Web site.

Page views peaked around 11 a.m. at 35,102 and remained steady into the mid-afternoon. They decreased between 2,000 and 3,000 every hour thereafter.

An estimated 225,053 page views were expected by the end of the day. On average, rrstar.com receives about 80,000 page views during weekdays for the entire site.

“It shows how powerful the Internet can be,” online editor Alex Gary said in reference to the day’s Web site activity.

About 98 percent of Tuesday’s page views were referred from other Web sites. The Drudge Report accounted for 155,089 of those views.