

New search engine uses human touch

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Humans are better at information-gathering than computers. That's the philosophy behind PreFound, the Web's new community-based search engine.

PreFound, which first opened its doors Tuesday morning, is based on the premise just about anything a person wants to search for has been searched for by someone else before.

To that end, the site lets users upload groups of links, or PreFound Finds, with the idea that other users searching for similar information can use the uploaded links to find what they want without wading through pages of search-engine results.

"We try to present users with what other users have found," said Steve Mansfield, PreFound co-founder.

Mansfield said PreFound's goal is to create search results that are more useful because of the human element.

"We are hoping that people try PreFound first, before they go to the Googles and Yahoos," he said.

The key piece of software is the PF Finder, a downloadable tool. The Finder lets users bring links together in groups. Users can later upload those groups onto PreFound's Web site.

The Finder also lets users return to a page in one keystroke and open

links below active pages for later use.

"The tools keep you from losing your train of thought," he said.

When uploading groups of links, users tag the groups with keywords, which the PreFound search engine uses.

Mansfield said that PreFound is "a tagging site that's very accessible."

In addition to Web-page links, PreFound groups can also include links to video, audio and podcasts.

"The multimedia functions are the true differentiator," said Mansfield.

Nancy Baym, associate professor at Kansas University and cyberculture expert, said PreFound is a step in a new direction for search engines.

"I've never seen anything like it," she said.

Baym said PreFound places a lot of faith in site users to make it a worthwhile tool.

"A site like this is only as good as its users," she said.

She noted that this is not necessarily a sign of doom.

"Wikipedia would be the parallel," she said. "Apparently the public at large has a big capacity for offering information for others to use with no obvious benefit to themselves."

"It's up to you to decide if you want to commit to being part of the community," Mansfield said. "We want to be useful whether you choose to be a part of the community or not."

Mansfield said that even though creating link groups requires downloading the PF Finder onto one's computer, users will not shy away.

"Almost every community search site involves some downloads," he said. "It's pretty standard in our community."

Baym said that even though a download is required, PreFound is not necessarily more invasive than other search engines.

"Google is intrusive in other kinds of ways, ways that people don't necessarily realize," she said.

Baym noted the potential for hijinx and misuse by PreFound users, but Mansfield said that each new upload is checked, first by computers to ensure that all the links are working, then by humans to ensure that they're all relevant.

PreFound was pre-loaded with 1.2 million uploads, Mansfield said. He added that PreFound hopes to have 2 million searches and 200,000 uploads per month.

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