

Blinkx at work on search engine for online video

September 2 2009, By Troy Wolverton

If you're like me, when looking for a video online, you reflexively go to YouTube or maybe to Hulu.

But a small San Francisco company called Blinkx is betting that behavior is going to change in coming years. In the same way consumers turned to search engines when the number of text Web pages on the Internet exploded, they will soon rely on new types of search engines to navigate the Internet's rapidly expanding offerings of [video](#), if Blinkx and analysts are right.

Over the past year, the online video market has seemed to consolidate around a handful of sites, rather than Balkanizing into a large number of them. Would-be [YouTube](#) rivals such as Joost have started to bow out of the game, while Hulu has made a name for itself as the pre-eminent site for Hollywood-produced content.

But despite some consolidation, the use of online video is spreading far beyond the handful of big players.

All told, Americans spent an average of 500 minutes per person in July watching, in aggregate, 21.4 million online videos. Those numbers were up 87 percent and 113 percent, respectively, from July 2008.

While YouTube still dominates online video and grew significantly over that period, its share of minutes and videos watched are down significantly.

Surfing around the Internet, you can easily see why. Every major site these days -- from Web stores such as Amazon.com to news sites like those of The New York Times and the San Jose Mercury News to commercial sites such as Apple.com -- includes video, much of which doesn't end up on YouTube or on any of the other large video portals.

That creates a need for reliable search engines to find all that [video content](#).

The problem now is that video is difficult to search. With text, search engines can easily scan for key words on particular Web pages. And they can use algorithms to rank results based not only on how frequently those key words appear but on factors such as how many other sites link to a particular page.

Search engines can also use text-based information, such as user-provided tags, to search for videos. But those tags may not correspond to keywords that are searched.

Even if they do, search engines typically can't get a user to the precise point within a video where the key words -- or images related to them -- can be found. That's not a big deal if the video is only a two-minute clip; it's a much bigger problem if the user has to comb through a 45-minute video to find a particular line or image.

"The experience with video search is pretty poor at this point," said Chris Sherman, executive editor at Search Engine Land, a Web site that focuses on the search industry. "We're probably where Web search was 10 years ago."

The folks at Blinkx have a plan for catching up. Like other video search engines, Blinkx gleans information about videos from the text-based data in and around the videos, including not only tags but also data about the

author of the video, the date it was uploaded and any descriptions of its content.

But the company's search engine goes several steps beyond that. It prioritizes videos based on how often a video on a site is viewed. So a video on CNN.com may rank higher in search results than one on YouTube, even though YouTube has more videos than CNN.com.

Blinkx's [search engine](#) also will do a more in-depth analysis of particular videos, first taking a close look at the audio track and then taking a look at images. The site uses speech-recognition technology to pick out key words within a video.

And Blinkx's software examines the sounds within the videos, listening for things such as crowd noises or even silence that might give clues to content.

It also can identify scene changes in a newscast, for example, which can indicate discrete blocks of content. It even can identify when there are human faces within a video. But the company has not yet cracked the much harder problems of identifying individual faces or particular objects.

If you're searching for "The Daily Show" host Jon Stewart's interview with stock market showman Jim Cramer, you'll find it just as easily by typing a few keywords into YouTube or Google's video search site as you will on Blinkx. But I found Blinkx useful in finding videos that were more obscure or harder to describe with key words, such as the Well-Manicured Man telling Fox Mulder in the "X-Files" to "trust no one."

I'm betting that there's going to be a lot of innovation in the years ahead as online video proliferates. And I think Blinkx's technology gives a sense of where video search is heading.

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