

Review: Searching for answers on Facebook

January 16 2013, by Barbara Ortutay



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg speaks at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif., Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2013. Zuckerberg introduced "graph search" Tuesday, a new service that lets users search their social connections for information about their friends' interests, and for photos and places. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

Facebook has [unveiled a new search tool](#) that gives users a chance to sift through the photos, places and other information available on the site—all through the lens of their social connections.

Would you like to know which of your [friends](#) live in San Francisco? Are you curious about who likes Madonna? Or are you dying to know which friends appeared in [photos](#) with you before 2006? [Facebook](#)'s new [search](#) tool will tell you, in the hopes that you'll spend more time on the world's largest online social network.

The [search feature](#), called "graph search," is being rolled out slowly. For now, users can only search in English, and the service will be available only to a tiny fraction of Facebook's more than 1 billion users. As part of a group of reporters who attended Facebook's unveiling of the service on Tuesday, I was one of these users.

I got a chance to try out the feature and sift through my friends' interests, photos and other data. While most searches revealed little information about my friends that I didn't already know, it was nice to see it indexed and categorized in a way that wasn't possible before. There have been countless times I've wished I could group my friends by where they live, or find people who've worked at a particular company.

Google, too, has tried to incorporate social features in its powerful search engine, but it doesn't have the breadth of [personal data](#) that Facebook has amassed. Even so, Facebook isn't the best place to search for home flu remedies or movie show times. As such, I will continue to use [Google](#) to find crucial information such as Ryan Gosling's age or the year "The [Hobbit](#)" was published.

Facebook, meanwhile, should help unearth interesting details about my social network. It's through Facebook's search feature I that I was able to find a trove of adorable "photos of my friends before 1990," or see which of my friends are fans of the savvy Seattle sex columnist Dan Savage (12 of them, it turns out).

Searching for photos is one of the most personal and interesting features

of the new tool. There are 19 photos of me and my husband taken by my friends that my friends like, for example. There are "fewer than 100" photos of my family before 2008, which is pretty good, considering I joined Facebook just a year earlier.

Rather than using keywords or various filters, Facebook's search tool aims to replicate the way people talk. It prompts users to "search for people, places and things" and will try to complete your sentences. It should get better over time as more people outside of Facebook's labs use it.

Graph search doesn't dig through people's status updates, only the likes and interests that they have listed on Facebook. But that could come later, as CEO Mark Zuckerberg hinted. The tool also searches photos—who's in them, who's liked them and who posted them. EMarketer analyst Debra Aho Williamson predicts a "mass exodus" of untagging and unliking of photos and interests as Facebook rolls out the search feature more broadly and people realize that the things they liked five years ago are suddenly searchable by their friends and others, depending on their privacy settings.

To soothe privacy concerns that invariably arise with every new feature Facebook announces, Zuckerberg stressed that users will only be able to find information they have access to. This means no matter how many times you search for "photos of Mark Zuckerberg in diapers," you won't find one unless Mr. Z has shared his hypothetical baby photos with you in the first place.

The [search tool](#) could take more than a year to roll out to all of Facebook's billion-plus users, and it'll surely see a lot of changes in that time. A shortcoming I already noticed is that few of my friends are the oversharing type. With notable exceptions, many of them don't "like" restaurants, don't share their location or disclose whether they are a fan

of Lady Gaga. Graph search is probably more fun —and more useful— for people whose friends share a lot.

For a better search experience, Facebook may have to nudge my friends to share more information about themselves and the photos they share. It won't be easy.

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