

Blekko, Montage offer new ways to search the Web

January 3 2011, By Mike Swift

Internet search engines have become such a helpful fixture of everyday life that it's tough to imagine life before them. They gather information at eye-blink speed, can guess a user's intent and present real-time results from Twitter and other social sites.

But the experience of searching the Web remains largely solitary, or, as Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg might put it - it's not social. While you can share the end result by pasting a link into an e-mail or a tweet, there's no way to share the cool stuff you brush past in the midst of a search.

That's starting to change, thanks to new search products, one from a [Silicon Valley startup](#) called Blekko and one from a tech giant as mainstream as they come, Microsoft.

Blekko, a Redwood City, Calif., search engine that can be found online at blekko.com, tries to screen out spam and links promoted by [search engine optimization](#) companies, which manipulate keywords and links to try to promote their clients in search results. But as of mid-December, Blekko also allows you to use your Facebook friends to filter Internet searches. In a sense, your friends provide the [search algorithm](#), rather than [Google](#) or Bing.

The main focus of Blekko, which launched in November and has received funding from prominent Silicon Valley investors like Marc Andreessen and Ron Conway, is to use human editors to select a

universe of authoritative websites. Blekko's intent is to screen out spam and SEO manipulation that can make many sites less useful, particularly in topics like personal finance, music lyrics and health.

Earlier this month, Blekko also started to allow users to harness their network of Facebook friends to "curate" search results. When a Blekko user enables the service, the search engine goes out and collects the large database of websites and pages that have been "liked" by the users' Facebook friends. The user can then filter subsequent searches so Blekko favors pages and websites that were endorsed by their friends.

"When somebody reads an article (on a newspaper website) and 'likes' the article, or 'likes' the site itself, that is somebody giving a quality vote - especially when it's somebody that you know," said Mike Markson, chief marketing officer for Blekko. "That is a social vote which is saying, 'This is a good quality site; this isn't spam.' "

It can be a fun and powerful tool. When I searched Blekko for "financial advisers," my Facebook friends - some of whom I would trust for financial advice and others I wouldn't - produced much more interesting results than what was delivered by Google and Bing, which were jammed with commercially sponsored links.

The tool, however, doesn't always work well. A search for Boston Celtics power forward Kevin Garnett produced a top link that I definitely didn't want - a news story about my favorite team being thrashed by the Orlando Magic in a playoff game last spring. Blekko apparently promoted that link because a lot of my Facebook friends are journalists, and a lot of them had "liked" the Orlando Sentinel's website.

If nothing else, Blekko's new social search service is a reminder of how your view of the world can be shaped by your friends.

Another interesting new social search service is Montage, an experimental service created by Microsoft's Future Social Experience Labs (or FUSE), a 30-person team at Microsoft that is trying to create real-time, media-rich online experiences that people can share with their friends.

Microsoft announced earlier this month that its Bing [search engine](#) would start showing whether a user's Facebook friends have liked a particular link that Bing has found. But Microsoft is also trying to build new products that make search more social, such as Montage. You can try Montage at fuse.microsoft.com.

The service allows you to find and gather up recent content on the Web about a particular topic, including news stories, photos, video, tweets and even analytics that track interest in a topic. You can edit those elements into a digital album, which you can share on Twitter or Facebook.

I did a Montage search for "SpaceX," the Southern California company that this month became the first private company to launch a spacecraft into orbit and then safely recover it back on Earth.

Montage is simple and intuitive to use. Within a few minutes, I had built a pretty cool page with an embedded video from YouTube of the Dec. 8 liftoff. My page included an array of news stories and photos I arranged on the page and a Twitter feed to track what people were saying about the launch. I was even able to add an analytics tile showing how traffic on Twitter spiked the day of the launch. I shared my album on my Facebook page; you can check it out at: bit.ly/hvyEnV.

Montage "is kind of like looking at the whole search experience end to end. It doesn't have to be a disposable process like it is today," said Matthew MacLaurin, director of FUSE Labs. "It's really saying the whole search experience should include the capture and rebroadcast of

what you find, and not the single goal-oriented end state."

A Facebook friend even hit the Like button for my Montage album. Maybe it will even show up on a Blekko search someday.

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