Analysis: Facebook's Graph Search takes different tack

7 February 2013, by Brandon Bailey

Looking for a reason to spend more time on Facebook? CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his crew of social-software gurus are convinced their new Graph Search function is just what you need.

Zuckerberg has touted Graph Search as a "third pillar" of the popular social networking service - as important to the Facebook experience as Timeline or News Feed, the two main pages where users can find their own posts and a daily stream of updates from friends. For many Facebook users, however, the new feature will take some getting used to.

That's because Graph Search works differently from Google or Bing, the search engines that most people use to tap the wisdom of the Web. It isn't built to search the entire Internet, and it won't answer all of your questions. But it lets you explore more aspects of your own social circles, as well as some unexpected corners of the online world, as I discovered while trying it over several days.

It does that by emphasizing results that are linked to your friends, while promising to respect users' privacy preferences. Rather than search the whole Web, Graph Search sorts through photos that have been uploaded to Facebook, people who have profiles on Facebook and artists or businesses that have created pages on Facebook. It will likely do more in the future, but it's limited today.

A few days after I registered - Facebook is introducing the service gradually to users who sign up for a beta test - I found a new blue bar at the top of my Facebook Timeline, inviting me to "Search for people, places and things." Once I clicked on the bar, it suggested categories such as "Photos of my friends," "Restaurants nearby," "Music my friends like" and "Photos I have liked."

That seems pretty straight-forward, but you can build on those suggestions by typing other phrases. Facebook designed the software to process phrases, not just keywords, so you can narrow or widen a search by typing more criteria, such as "Photos taken by friends in San Jose, Calif., before 1999" or "Restaurants in Palo Alto, Calif., that my friends like."

Sometimes the phrasing doesn't work, or Facebook will suggest an alternative. As it turned out, none of my friends have uploaded old pictures of San Jose. But a search for "Photos of my friends before 1999" produced a few hilarious hairstyles and some nostalgia-laden class pictures from grade-school days.

I also tried "Photos taken in China by my friends." Up popped some fascinating images that I'd missed seeing in my Facebook feed. There were street scenes taken by a former co-worker, gorgeous landscapes by a San Jose Mercury News photographer, and a snap of an old cop buddy on vacation - grinning broadly beside a young Chinese officer posed stiffly in uniform.

Facebook also shows the privacy setting for each photo: Some of the China photos were uploaded by friends who use the broadest "public" setting, which means any stranger could find them with a general search for "Photos taken in China." But others were marked to show that my friends had shared them only with their friends, which means strangers

would not see them.

My query about Palo Alto restaurants had mixed results: High on the list was a pretentious burger joint endorsed by a pal who I thought had better judgment. But there were several interesting suggestions from my friend the food blogger, who I know has good taste.

That seemed useful, but only because my friend the foodie is very active on Facebook. As critics have pointed out, the "friends' recommendations" aspect of Facebook search isn't all that helpful unless you have Facebook friends who are prolific about posting their likes. And for now, you can't search through status updates, only "likes."

Still, you don't have to depend on friends. A Facebook manager suggested using Graph Search to find restaurants liked by people who went to the Culinary Institute of America, a high-end cooking school. That produced a French restaurant that I might try - if I'm ever in the mood for a really expensive meal.

For that kind of search, the permutations seem endless: Search for local Japanese restaurants liked by people who have lived in Japan. Discover new music liked by people who are fans of that obscure Canadian rocker you like. Find out which presidential candidate was more popular among workers at a particular company, or which politicians are liked by a particular individual.

Facebook will suggest ways to refine your search so you can, for example, get a list of single people with whom you have a friend in common, and then narrow that list to San Francisco residents who like Scrabble or salsa dancing. You can specify gender, religion, age range and other characteristics.

This brings up the "creepy stalker" issue. You can search for people who meet a set of criteria - they don't have to be friends of friends - and get of list of complete strangers, with their profile photos and any "likes" or interests they have shared in public.

You can also search for "People who like" any number of topics. As it turns out, a surprising number of people have hit the "like" button on

Facebook fan pages with such titles as "Racism," "Prostitutes" or "Getting Drunk."

Facebook says it won't show information to complete strangers unless you've already marked it "public" for sharing. But some people might be surprised to know their "likes" are so easily discovered.

That makes it all the more important for Facebook users to check their settings and review their past activity on the network. In the past, Facebook has been criticized for privacy controls that are confusingly complicated, but the company has streamlined its settings and made it easier to restrict certain information.

You can find shortcuts to privacy tools by clicking the padlock icon in the upper right corner of your Facebook page, or get more detailed controls by clicking the gear icon next to it. Click on the shortcut for "Who can see my stuff?" and you'll see a link to an Activity Log that shows what you've posted or "liked."

Once you're in the Activity Log, you can also change the privacy settings on old posts - something to consider as more people do more searches on the world's largest social network.

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HOW TO USE GRAPH SEARCH:

Facebook is introducing its new search tool gradually to a limited number of users. You can see an example of how it works at www.facebook.com/about/graphsearch

You can get on the waiting list to try Graph Search by clicking the link at the bottom of that page.

As more people try Graph Search, they may be able to find your Facebook posts more easily. It's a good idea to review your activity and privacy settings, which you can do by clicking the padlock at the top of your own Facebook page.

Facebook has more information on Graph Search privacy at this page:

newsroom.fb.com/News/567/Prote … vacy-in-Graph-Search

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