

Facebook pushes search feature to more users

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Users who may have grown frustrated with Facebook's rudimentary search feature are getting an updated version designed to make it easier to find people, places and photos on the site.

Facebook unveiled its social search tool in January, but only made it available to a small fraction of its 1.1 billion users, as its engineers continued to tweak and test it. Over the next few weeks, starting on Monday, the company is rolling out the social search tool, called "Graph Search," to everyone whose language is set to U.S. English.

Unlike searches on Google, which are good for finding specific things like roasted kale recipes or Mizuno running shoes, Facebook's tool is most useful in unearthing information about your social circles. Graph Search lets you find friends who live in San Francisco who are vegan. Friends of friends who live near you and like hiking. Photos of your boyfriend taken before you met him in 2010. Nearby restaurants that your friends like — and so on.

But soon after Facebook launched the tool, the Internet had a field day with less innocuous and more embarrassing queries, showing just how much information people reveal about themselves on the site, intentionally or not. Care to find out which brand of condoms your friends prefer? Graph Search might tell you.

A blog called actualfacebookgraphsearches.tumblr.com posted a collection of searches ranging from "married people who like prostitutes" to "current employers of people who like racism." Both yielded more than 100 people.

While it is possible that some of those Facebook users are fully aware that what they've shared is easily searchable, it is likely that some are not. It's easy to click "like" on a page and forget about it, and it's even easier to assume that no one will search through your photos from party days at the Burning Man festival five years ago.

To avoid any unpleasantness, Facebook plans to notify users that it's "getting easier for people to find photos and other things you've shared with them" along with a reminder that they can check "who can see my stuff" under their privacy settings.

"The goal is to avoid bad surprises," said Nicky Jackson Colaco, privacy and safety manager at Facebook. But she stressed Facebook's view that the search tool "indexes information differently than we have ever been able to do before, in a really positive way."

It's easier, for example, to find a long-lost classmate with a common name, or to find common interests with friends of friends.

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Facebook does not currently show users ads based on what they are searching for, but the company may do in the future. As Google has shown, it's a lucrative business. Research firm eMarketer estimates that Google will take nearly 42 percent of all U.S. digital ad spending this year, well above Facebook's share of less than 7 percent.

With its new search tool, Facebook is clearly trying to divert traffic and ad spending from its rival. Whether this will work will become more clear as more people begin using it.

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