

Web 2.0: Facebook graph search

Phil Bradley

Facebook has been rolling out an improvement to their search capability and I wanted to spend a column looking at that, and the implications that it has for all of us, not just for information professionals. While it has some positives, there are also a worrying number of disadvantages, particularly to people who don't lock their accounts down tightly.

The context

I firmly believe that Facebook doesn't want to be part of the Internet, it wants to BE the Internet for the vast majority of people. Its membership numbers about 1.25 billion people, which is about the size of the whole of the internet in 2004. You can look at individual company pages in the same way that you can look at websites (and in fact companies like Pepsi and Coke get more views on their Facebook pages than they do on their traditional sites), millions of photographs are uploaded daily, we share thoughts and ideas, we play games and we communicate using the Facebook interface. Most importantly, we are the fodder that pays the wages; we look at the advertisements and click on them, and that's what makes Facebook their money. So the longer we stay on Facebook, the less likely we are to click on adverts elsewhere - such as on Google.

Facebook Graph Search

Consequently, if we're searching on Facebook, that's where we stay, which is why this search option is such a big deal for the company, and why they've been rolling it out across the world. You will know if you have it already since you'll see that there is a different Facebook logo in the extreme top left of the blue band (just an 'f' rather than the name), the search box will have 'search for people, places and things' and friend request, chat and notification logos will have shifted across to the right hand side of the bar. Finally, if you click into the search box Facebook will prompt you to search for People you may know, Music my friends like, Photos I have liked and so on. If you're not seeing this, it's not been made available to you yet, but you can still get it. Click on the cog wheel (top right) and choose Account Settings. Under 'general account settings' change the language from English (UK) to English (US) and that should do the trick. If it doesn't work all I can suggest is patience - you should get it in the coming days or weeks.

What you can search for

Let's start with some simple, helpful searches. 'Photos that I have liked' is pretty obvious, but you can now refine this search to photographs of particular people, specific locations, particular dates, people who have commented on images, others who have also liked the same images, or photographs by specific people. Consequently, it's now possible to see connections that previously were almost impossible to work out, in the click of a button.

We can start combining different elements though - I can now run a search on friends of my friends who live nearby and like a particular musician. It would theoretically be possible to work this out by going through lists of my friends to see where they live, but that's never going to happen. In fact, I can search for just about anything, and Facebook will tell me which of my friends have liked that particular page, which also tells me some useful stuff.

If you're responsible for a library Facebook page, there are some interesting possibilities here. You can start by finding pages named Essex for example. This

then gives you the possibility of liking those pages, introducing their readers to your page and so on. We can narrow the search to pages named Essex that are books - useful for a display or for further linking possibilities. Next we can narrow to images, locations, time periods and so on. Alternatively, a search for 'Events Essex' pulls up content that might be useful if someone is searching for something to do over a holiday. It's just as easy to find libraries in the next county, to see how they are using Facebook, who their friends are and so on. Also importantly, if you have liked specific pages, that may give people a little more reassurance - if you like it, then the quality and authority is going to be first rate. You're going to be seen as an expert, so it's worth keeping that in mind when wandering around the Web, because any page that you happen to like may well turn up in a search.

Worrying implications

Now, this is all fine and dandy and can be really useful; absolutely no doubt about it. It's going to mean that if I want to find a good restaurant in Birmingham, I'm going to be able to get that information directly from my friends, rather than relying on a Google algorithm that I'm not sure I can trust. However, I can also find out a lot of information about complete strangers - if they have made it publically available, and that is an important point. There are still large numbers of people who don't lock their accounts down, so it's important to understand the implications so that you're in a good place to advise any library member who asks you.

To put a particularly nasty stalking hat on for a moment - I can run a search on female members of Facebook, who are of a particular age and who live nearby. I could then limit that to pages that they have liked such as 'Getting drunk'. It's then easy to look at individual accounts, find any nightclub pages they've liked, see their friends and interests, which is useful for gaining an introduction to them. I'm sure that you can see where I'm going with this, and I think it's particularly worrying. A further example - it's possible to find a list of men in relationships with other men in particular countries that take a dim view of same-sex relationships, and it's far too easy to identify such people - it's certainly making it very easy to repressive regimes to do exactly that.

To take a business approach; I could run a search on elderly people who live near me who like gardening, and use this information to target garden-related advertising towards them.

I also have doubts about the validity and accuracy of the information that Facebook is giving me. I did several searches that should have returned a lot of results, and I got very few. I was also able to search for 'people who like racism' and who work for a particular company - one of these in particular had absolutely no indication as to her political interests at all in her account, so I wonder why Facebook made that association. Also, in order to comment on some pages it's been necessary to like the page to be able to pass a negative comment; Facebook may take that mean that you actively 'like' racism, when the exact opposite is the case!

Summary

As with everything, Facebook Graph Search can be used for good or ill, and all points in between. If you don't have it yet, I'd strongly suggest getting it to try out, and see what information you can find. I also think that it's really important to review your settings to make sure that people can only find out what you want them to see, and to limit the incorrect assumptions they may possibly make. Also very importantly, this is only the first iteration of Facebook Graph Search - it's only going to get more powerful and potentially intrusive in the future.