

Social Networking Sites and Personal Information Search Engines
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Abstract: Social networking sites have become some of the most visited sites on the Web in 2006. Millions of people have joined one or more, largely because of the interactivity between users and the availability of profiles and contacts. However, social networking sites are not the only places to find ‘public’ information on individuals. In addition to the huge general-purpose search engines, ‘people finder’ search engines are also attracting a lot of publicity due to their convenient information. Read on for a ‘taste’ of notable social networking sites and personal information engines that provide publicly available data on many of us—probably even you!

Introduction: Personal Profiles and Publicly Available Information

‘Social networking’ sites—interactive networks of photos, blogs, user profiles, groups, and possibly internal email systems, interconnecting people who join them, allowing for direct and indirect interaction—have certainly become some of the most visited sites on the Web in 2006. In fact, you may be very surprised at just how often. Millions of people, especially high school and college students, have joined one or more, largely because of this interactivity, and, definitely for the availability of profiles and contacts (individual, bands, institutions, etc.).

Back in February 2006, I quoted on my Web site the “*MySpace*” *Wikipedia* article, which then stated that social networking sites “appeal to young adults, and because of the interactivity between users, many people also discover new groups of people or bands by looking through other people’s profiles and their contact lists. Additionally, the easy communication and built-in focus on pictures has helped *MySpace* become a haven for the creation of new trends and the dissemination of current ones.” This still rings true to me and others ‘blogging’ about these sites.

Definitely, these notable social networking sites are excellent places on the Web to find ‘public’ information on their members. Without a doubt, many students, high school and college alike, and educators of all types, including librarians, have joined several of these sites, seeing them as exciting opportunities to find out about and better connect to people, places, and topics of interest. I believe that the following sample of notable social networking sites are worth exploring, especially since people across the globe and in every conceivable type of occupation—including our students/patrons and colleagues—are visiting, writing about, and using them now. We should, at the very least, recognize and understand more about some of the top players in the social networking field. Read on and visit the following sites for a small ‘taste’ of what these personal social networks have in store for you, and later in this article, we will cover a few personal information search engines as well.

Sample of Notable Personal Social Networking Sites

MySpace.com: A Place for Friends [<http://www.myspace.com/>]

“*MySpace* (or *MySpace.com*) is a free service (social networking site) that uses the Internet for online communication through an interactive network of photos, blogs, user profiles, email, web forums, and groups, as well as other media formats.” The current *MySpace* service was founded by Tom Anderson in 2003. Amazingly, according to the *Alexa* site—which provides web traffic information—in August 2006, *MySpace* was listed as the third most popular site in the U.S. and ranked sixth globally. *MySpace* just celebrated its 100 millionth member registration on August 9, 2006, and (August 22nd), 44,979 sites now link to it. There have been a boatload of articles about *MySpace* recently, including those dealing with safety, especially because of the detailed profiles that many publish there, so there’s no shortage of coverage for what is, for now, the king of personal social networking sites. Interestingly, Google has just signed a \$900 million deal to provide search functions and advertising to *MySpace*, so look for the familiar Google search boxes on *MySpace* later this year.

Windows Live Spaces [<http://spaces.live.com/>]

Began in late 2004, *Windows Live Spaces* is owned and operated by Microsoft. *WLSpaces* is free and has been integrated with the Microsoft’s *Windows Live Messenger* (the old *MSN Messenger*) instant messaging system. What is interesting to me about this is that *WLSpaces* is “one of the fastest growing blogging communities in the world with an estimated 100 million unique visitors per month as of May 2006,” according to an article cited within the “*Windows Live Spaces*” *Wikipedia* article. *Alexa* does rank it very high, stating that *WLSpaces* is ranked 13th in the world right now, and it is 11th in the U.S. It only has 2,415 sites linking to it, but it boasts over 30 million registered users. This is definitely one to watch.

Facebook [<http://www.facebook.com/>]

“*Facebook* is an online directory that connects people through social networks at schools,” and, again here, the profiles that members construct and publish can be quite detailed. There are two specific *Facebooks* from which to choose: one for college students to join and one for high schoolers. *Facebook* was founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, and it is growing in popularity. According to my students at Rider University, *Facebook* is a favorite here. As of August 2006, *Alexa* considers it to be the world’s 66th most popular website, 16th in the U.S., with 2,008 sites that link to it and almost eight million registered users. I have used it to communicate with my public speaking students, after I figured out that they were communicating with each other via its network—that’s how they knew when someone’s birthday in class was coming up before I did! By the way, Microsoft has very recently struck a deal with *Facebook* to be the exclusive seller and provider of banner advertising and sponsored links for them.

LiveJournal [<http://www.livejournal.com/>]

“*LiveJournal* (*LJ*) is a simple-to-use communication tool that lets you express yourself and connect with friends online. You can use *LJ* in many different ways: as a private journal, a blog, a social network and much more. *LJ* is built on open source software.” It is mostly popular in the U.S., but there are many people registered from Russia, Canada, and the UK, too. *Alexa* ranks *LJ* as 63rd in the world, and 39th in the U.S., and they have 10 million registered users to date. *LJ* has been around since 1999, however, which is probably why it has 55,000 links to it.

orkut [<https://www.orkut.com/>]

“*orkut* is an online community that connects people through a network of trusted friends. We are committed to providing an online meeting place where people can socialize, make new acquaintances and find others who share their interests. Join *orkut* to expand the circumference of your social circle.” The name may sound strange, even though I am sure that we are used to strange names on the Web. However, there is a reason: this social networking site, owned by Google, is named after Orkut Büyükkökten, the creator of the site and a Turkish software engineer at Google. By the way, even though *Alexa* ranks it 24th in the world right now, it does not seem to be on the map for the U.S., as it is not even in the top 100. It does, however, have 6,310 sites that link to it right now and over 24 million registered users.

Xanga [<http://www.xanga.com/>]

“*Xanga* is a community of online diaries and journals. You can easily start your own free journal, share thoughts with your friends and meet new friends, too. The *Xanga* service is a blogging & social networking site - it exists to promote sharing and community.” According to *Wikipedia*, *Xanga* is “operated by Xanga.com, Inc., based in New York City,” and its “users are referred to as ‘Xangans’.” It first started out as a book and music review site. Now, this social networking site is ranked in the world by *Alexa* as the 41st most popular site, but here in the U.S., it is not as popular as others—it is only ranked 90th here, but it does have 22,028 sites that currently link to it and 40+ million registered users.

Friendster [<http://www.friendster.com/>]

Friendster was probably the king of social networking sites in 2004, but it has since lost ground to *MySpace* and others. Still, it has a membership of over 30 million, which is not shabby at all. *Friendster* considers itself to be the “best way to stay in touch with your friends and it’s the fastest way to discover the people and things that matter to you most. Headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area, *Friendster* aims to make the world a smaller place by bringing the power of social networking to every aspect of life, one friend at a time.” *Alexa* ranks it 45th in the world in August 2006, but here in the U.S., it has definitely lost ground to other more popular social networking sites, as it is not even in the top 100 most popular. But there are several very recent blog postings this week stating that *Friendster* may be back on its way up in the rankings, and it does have almost 7,000 linking to it now. We’ll see what happens with it.

hi5 [<http://www.hi5.com/>]

According to *hi5* itself, “*hi5* offers a popular destination for the teens and twenties demographic around the world. Over 40 million members around the world have registered for *hi5* to discover friends with similar interests, to reconnect with friends from the past, and to express their personalities. In less than two years, *hi5* has built one of the fastest growing online destinations. Internet media has become increasingly important, especially to the generation that spends time on *hi5*.” *hi5* does have over 40 million registered members, concentrating in Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America. It is ranked by *Alexa* as 57th in the world, but it only has 1,258 sites linking to it, and the U.S. population does not seem to know much about it right now. Something I found interesting about it was that several high profile singers and models are confirmed to be members, according to the “*hi5.com*” *Wikipedia* article.

Final Words on Social Networking Sites

I could add others to the list, but I think you will get the idea, and we still need to cover some of the notable personal information search engines. Still, I cannot go on without at least mentioning a few more famous or up-and-coming social networking sites; for instance, do look at *Classmates.com*, even though its popularity seems to be fading in North America—you know you have seen their ads! Also, *Bebo* is possibly the fastest-growing social networking site in the U.S., but its ranking here is still low compared to others. Of course, there are many others, especially depending on how you define social networking—AOL’s *AIM*, Yahoo’s *Flickr* and *del.icio.us*, and *YouTube* are dynamic, fast-growing online sharing communities, but I categorize them a bit differently, and, therefore, did not highlight them here. Others to explore might be *Yahoo! 360*, *Tagged.com*, and *Piczo*, and especially all of the blogging sites out there, like *Blogger*, *Bloglines*, etc. Anyway, I am quickly running out of space for this article, and I cannot cover everything, so I must move on to the last part of this article now (but you still might like to browse the “list of social networking websites” found on *Wikipedia*!).

Personal Information Search Engines

As with personal social networking sites, it is sometimes hard to limit the list. I did this merely by researching and talking to many librarians and other education colleagues, and, of course, by choosing those that I thought were interesting in the scope of information provided. Again, the length of this article did inhibit my ‘creativity’ a bit, but I think the following personal information search engines are good examples of ‘quality’ engines. I am not saying that the information they provide is correct, because at times I found it not to be so. For instance, some of them did not provide the correct age for some of my relatives. Still, I believe they would still prove to be of interest to you, so here are a few of the more popular engines in the U.S. or world for you to play with.

A Few Notable Personal Information Search Engines

LinkedIn [<http://www.linkedin.com/>]

LinkedIn, a personal information search engine, could also be categorized as a social networking site, although it does cater to business people. It offers both free and fee-based options, and its goal is “to become the most useful business web site for millions of professionals across the globe.” This online network and search engine, as of the summer of 2006, connects almost 10 million experienced professionals from around the world, representing 130 industries. You join for free, create a “profile that summarizes your professional accomplishments. Your profile helps you find and be found by former colleagues, clients, and partners. You can add more connections by inviting trusted contacts to join *LinkedIn* and connect to you. Your network consists of your connections, your connections’ connections, and the people they know, linking you to thousands of qualified professionals.” You may or may not have heard of *LinkedIn*, but it is certainly growing, and although it is not very popular right now throughout the world (rank of 262), it is fairly popular here, as *Alexa* ranks it as the 59th most popular site in the U.S. as of August 2006, and 1,809 sites currently link to it. I actually updated my profile (job title, education, interests, etc.) in *LinkedIn* today while researching for and writing this article.

WhitePages.com: Phone Directory with Free People Search [<http://whitepages.com/>]

Who has not heard of “WhitePages”? Well, *WhitePages* states that they are “the leading provider of online directory assistance services to consumers. The company continually strives to be the single best source for finding information to contact people and businesses while respecting their privacy. The WhitePages.com Network is comprised of *WhitePages.com*, *WhitePages.ca*, *PhoneNumber.com*, and *411.com*. *WhitePages.com* offers consumers a free, simple, fast and reliable way to identify the personal and business contact information they need.” It does seem to be fairly quick for locating personal information, such as spouses, addresses, phone numbers, and neighbors—and it links you to *US Search* (see below) for more. *Alexa* ranks *WhitePages* fairly high (489th in the world) right now, but its popularity is dropping.

ZoomInfo: Free People Search Engine [<http://www.zabasearch.com/>]

“*ZoomInfo*, the premier summarization search engine [also called a vertical search engine], delivers fresh, comprehensive information on over 31 million business professionals and 2 million companies across virtually every industry. How do we do it? Well, at the risk of being boastful, we have incredible technology that [Jonathan Stern] and [Michel Decary] and [Jeremy Rothman-Shore] invented. *ZoomInfo* finds, understands and extracts information from millions of online sources such as Web sites, press releases, electronic news services and SEC filings and summarizes the information into a comprehensive format.” What they did do on me and a few of my colleagues, for instance, is automatically create focused summaries of us using a wide variety of online sources, and it can do the same for a company as it does for an individual. I found it very interesting, although not totally correct. In case this doesn’t still interest you, know that it “powers people search for Amazon’s *A9.com* and *Business Week*,” according to *Wikipedia*. You can register and create a Web summary, if one does not exist or cannot be found. Interestingly, *Alexa*’s world rank for *ZoomInfo* is 3,072, with its popularity rapidly climbing.

US Search: Be Informed [<http://www.ussearch.com/>]

“For over a decade, *US Search* has given its customers peace of mind by providing the right information to make faster, safer, and smarter decisions for both consumers and Fortune 1000 companies.” They state that *US Search* ranks third (behind only *Yahoo! Get Local* and *Superpages.com*) as the most visited Web site in the ‘Directory Category - Nielsen/NetRating’ of the most popular directory and local guide sites. What I found interesting about this site is that the basic free search can provide you with the age of the person being searched. It was eerily correct for the people I tried it with. And a few people I know who have never used the Internet for anything, and never will, were disturbed that they ages were available—sorry! FYI: *Alexa* ranks *US Search* as the 3,325th most popular in the world, and it is on the rise.

ZabaSearch: Free People Search Engine [<http://www.zabasearch.com/>]

ZabaSearch got a lot of publicity last year, much of it negative, and since then, they have changed the look and feel of their site dramatically. Still, they stress that they are “The #1 Free People Search and Public Information Search Engine,” and I have found it to be a powerful people search engine that can return personal information going back as far as 10 years, to include addresses (with satellite photos of the homes), phone numbers, birth year, and more. They claim that all of the material that they provide is available to the public (which seems to be true), but they make it much easier for us by putting it all together for us. By the way, *Alexa* ranks this site as 4,826th in the world, with its popularity or use going down fairly rapidly.

PrivateEye: Because You Need To Know [<http://www.privateeye.com/>]

This 'People Search' section of *PrivateEye* "searches 10 databases and 2,268,819,679 records" (by the way, I haven't noticed any change in record numbers they provide). "Databases searched include real property records, voters' registration, current & historical phone records, magazine subscriptions, change of address, national drivers & other proprietary databases." *Alexa* give this a rank of 13,423 in the world, with its use slowly declining.

Conclusion

So, I ask you: Do you know who you, your friends, family, or colleagues may be 'talking to' or what you, they, or companies may be 'sharing' about you online? You know that social networking sites have become high-traffic sites in 2006 because of their interactivity and available information. But, unfortunately, social networking sites are getting a lot of negative publicity now, too, because of that personal information that becomes public. Just remember that anything you and others put 'up there' can find its way 'down here,' so do clean up your 'digital dirt' when you can, in case it hurts you later (like in the next job interview, maybe).

But personal social networking sites are not the only Web places to find public information on individuals. In addition to the huge general-purpose search engines (*Google*, *Yahoo!*, *MSN*), remember that a wealth of 'people finder' search engines are attracting a lot of publicity due to their easily shared information, too. I am told that there is not very much you can do about information on you that is retrieved in the major search engines' results, but what's nice about some of these social networking sites and personal information search engines is that you can edit or provide feedback to correct errors on the information they do provide. It's not a perfect system, but at least you now know of several notable social networking sites and personal information search engines providing publicly available data on you—and probably most of us!

As I stated earlier, you may not be interested in all of this social networking-personal information sharing 'stuff,' but we all should, at the very least, recognize and understand more about some of the top social networking players and find out what they know about us! No harm in a little 'ego surfing' or 'vanity searching,' right? Then, if you do find digital dirt about you that you can't seem to correct, you might try starting your own profile on one of these sites, or start blogging. Eventually older, incorrect information will be buried under the new! *Maybe*.

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