

How the Social Internet Simplifies Source Identification

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I'm so happy 'cause today I found my friends. They're in my head.

– Nirvana

At the cold dawn of the modern internet era, back when Paris Hilton was only undressing Ken & Barbie dolls, 'connecting online' meant geeks were exchanging data on digital bulletin boards. As the internet matured, pornography took center stage and dominated the dial-up lines, prompting critics to consider it all a fad.

But as time passed, eye-opening internet businesses emerged to crack the foundations of industry – Amazon, eBay, and Craigslist to name a few. Around the time of Al Gore's recount (2000), mind-boggling applications changed the way everything worked, from new distributed data models to nascent software-as-a-service platforms. Not surprisingly, pornography still crowded the highway.

CONNECTING ONLINE

Fast forward a few more years and MySpace explodes from a small dating site into the world's largest social network. Skip to 2007 and -- if you believe the analysts -- connecting online is actually going to eclipse porn for the first time in the history of the interwebs.

Why are people connecting online? Well, in my opinion it's mostly for dating, talking rag time, and sharing places to steal music and movies. However, many people are actually connecting with real business goals. (Others are living together in virtual worlds, but let's not talk about them because it spooks me out, okay?)

So hooray for the internet and capitalism; together they make us all want to join the connected. This article is all about the new deluge of human source information that's arisen in the wake of this furious networking.

AGGREGATING PEOPLE INFORMATION

Several years ago I wrote a piece for SCIP.online about 'Direct Pathways to Sources on the Internet.' Since then, things have really matured. For starters, nobody capitalizes 'internet' anymore.

In practical terms, hundreds of new sites have become very good at aggregating and organizing information about people via networks of personal pages, blogs, and elsewhere. Some have emerged with an exclusive focus on people search, and still others have sprouted hoping only to help people manage their Cybil-esque online identities (as in, "I've got a blog, a corporate site and a business profile too, but when I'm drunk and want to share the photos I become Awesomeo4000").

SITES WITH INFORMATION ABOUT PEOPLE

Rather than walk you through a dizzying array of sites, I'll cluster these assorted tools into a few large groups and grade several as if they were students in the class of Web 2.0 (where there are no straight A students). From here, you can easily identify those sites worthy of your honest time and consideration. As you may imagine, this list is by no means exhaustive.

Wink.com: Grade A-, but must show formulas next time.

Wink.com is quite an interesting site – a social networking site meta-search tool. It searches for people across sites like MySpace, Friendster, Bebo and others. They claim to be approaching the 200 million profiles mark, but considering how many people exist on all of the sites searched, and how many profiles are fake and abandoned, that number may be well below 100 million.

What's particularly nice about this site, beyond the simple and easy interface, is the ability to search for tags

as well as names (or location). This is an excellent tool for supplemental source research, a way to work with your source list and uncover their other possible online identities. If you're hiring, it could be an equally good tool for checking out potential hires. They've also built an interesting sort of 'white pages' to browse all of these profiles, including the many built directly at Wink (you can build a profile there). But could you imagine navigating a 200 million entry version of the white pages? Exactly.

Cogmap.com: Grade B+, for effort.

Cogmap is really just several clever guys who took organizational charts, merged them with wiki's, and put them up in a cool "Web 2.0" interface. The site is about collecting organizational chart information for America's largest companies as well as 'any company' for which a volunteer user might contribute data.

Why might someone help to build an organizational chart for Cogmap for no money? Honestly, I have no idea, but people are doing it – and they're doing it well. The 'wiki' effect means that every chart change produces a new version, so if a user is suspicious of any element, he might spontaneously 'roll back' to a prior version or select multiple versions to compare on the fly. This site has some very serious potential; the only major drawbacks being lack of company coverage and contributor volume. However, it's a good first place to stop if you are examining any major player in the industry or want to build and present an organizational chart online for public consumption.

Ziggs.com: Grade C+, but with permission for a retake.

Ziggs is now calling itself a "free service that organizes the internet around your people, your work and your life." Isn't that what my computer is for, even though it cost money? Originally Ziggs tried to build a business scraping the web sites of every company online by pulling in all management-type pages, and populating its database with reams of profiles. That information is all still there, and it's reasonably solid.

Last year, in a fit of apparent social-networking-itis, they relaunched their site as a place where you should register, give up some personal information, and centralize your contacts. Many company employees are listed, along with loads of people in general. But the site's not outstanding, and it doesn't get Boston-caliber traffic, so it's often wanting for 'more cowbell' (per Saturday Night Live). Oh, and Ziggs is also trying to hawk a five-buck-a-month 'profile promotion' service – and that smacks of desperation.

Jigsaw.com: Grade A- for clarity, but benefits from a grading curve.

First some disclosure: I've served on the board of advisors at this company, though I no longer do, and I still talk to

their CEO all the time. The site is a modern day business card swap, simple as that. Put in cards and information on company employees and earn points. Spend points (or hard cash) to buy contact information.

Searching is reasonably granular, and the site has begun to amass reams of novel private company information (via users) such as company size (headcount and revenue) and other salient details. They're getting better, but it is only free to those who contribute and regularly swap – otherwise you are forced to 'pay to play' so to speak.

They've got some amazing features in the works right now, and the user base is becoming quite large. Definitely a great place to search for specific company employees by function, location, industry, and so on at very low cost (versus a list broker or other large data vendor), replete with direct dial phone numbers and email addresses..

LinkedIn.com: Grade A-, but note that this is in the lower-level course.

LinkedIn is the best-known player within this whole category of business networking, a MySpace for the money crowd. The site is several years old and has close to ten million profiles, although it doesn't disclose how many profiles are abandoned, made-up, duplicated and so on. My guess is that their 'real active user base' is about one-third to one-half of what they claim, but it's getting better as time passes.

LinkedIn not only allows for extensive searching of company employees, skills, titles, locations and the like, but they also allow for filtering by current and past employees. That's useful stuff. They have a contact mechanism, with an option to pay for more search and contact privileges, but you probably won't need it since the new LinkedIn trend is one in which people edit contact information directly into their profiles.

The site allows for one to expand the search feature by establishing connections with other users, sort of a kid's version of social networking analytics but with only a linear interface. Using the site will make you feel popular and connected once you see how big the network gets through just 5 to 10 connections; this makes it an excellent resource for both consultants seeking sources as well as those low in self-esteem.

ZoomInfo.com: Grade B+, but this is a tough course!

ZoomInfo, formerly known as Eliyon, is still trying to get people to pay thousands of dollars per year to use what is effectively an 'advanced search' button on their website. They've scraped and harvested tens of millions of profiles from the internet by drafting natural language queries that search for job titles and similar nomenclature within industry, and they've done an amazing job pulling it all together.

Over time, the application has become easier to use, bigger, faster, and generally more prominent via partnerships

(for example, they power the people search at Yahoo!). Oddly, this company was put together by individuals who created a business card scanning device, so one might not think of them as 'search engine' gurus.

They play a heavy optics game when it comes to bragging about the size of the database, and that can get tired. Even if you filter out all of the garbage, however, the numbers are still enormous. This is a great research resource and I truly hope that they open up the service and get rid of the fee structure. Such a move would require a leap of faith, but they may honestly hold the potential to be the Google of people search.

Spock.com: Grade C, despite the hype this kid does not test well.

Spock has got to be the single-most overhyped entrant in this entire category in years. They have some big brains, a roll of venture capital money and a brilliant teaser campaign running through A-list bloggers. I was recently invited into their beta and all that I can say is, "when will this page refresh?"

The site is a mish-mash of profile manager meets Wink meets LinkedIn – going for a networking layer that leverages tagging as a core search tool. Users are urged to fill out details, add tags, tag others, add favorites and so on. What's really confusing is the intended audience. There are better, faster, hipper and ultimately easier profile managers out there (see section below), so is this site chasing the business crowd (LinkedIn.com users) or do they want to get college kids on board?

As things stand now, the site search tools are severely lacking, but tech company coverage is solid. However, it's quite difficult to search. Since anybody can self-tag or tag others, searching for a company name via tags is slow music. Hopefully they'll mature a bit before their big launch, and when they do I'll come back to try it again.

WikiYou.com: Grade C, needs to pay more attention in class.

WikiYou bills itself as the "unauthorized biography of every person on earth." With fewer than ten thousand entries, that's quite a claim. Perhaps they mean the planet B612, that tiny little planet where The Little Prince lived in Saint-Exupery's famous children's story.

In any case, this team has created a compilation of both personal and celebrity profiles subject to edit and commentary by any site visitor willing to endure a brief registration process (people appear to be quite interested in telling stories about folks they know). At first blush, they appear to be a bit like Spock.com, yet they're after something altogether different -- biographies layered onto social networking features.

Users might edit their profile or add another individual (that's worrisome, wouldn't like to find myself in there unless

I did the edits) and link to external profiles, and blogs. Many users fill out professional and educational information and add or embed links to photos and videos. To top it all off, any registered user may be a "fan" of any other profile (celebrity or personal) without that individual's consent or approval (just like in real life!).

Feels like a case of reinventing MySpace with a new design and interface for a slightly more mature crowd. However, what holds my interest on this very young site is the degree to which people are willing to add real information and links within profiles, hiding less from the public. This makes it more like a FaceBook.com than a MySpace.com. Links to personal details, friends' sites, and additional networks makes it a potentially useful source location tool. Only problem is that this has all been done before, and I'm far from convinced that this site will get real traction.

Jobster.com: Grade B+, but this kid has some trouble focusing.

Jobster launched with venture capital money a few years ago as a job referral networking engine – you'd post a job (for money) and then 'network through contacts' to a hire. They'll deny it, but it never really quite took off as imagined, despite the press. Along the way, many people began posting profiles and resumes with tags and images and a slew of LinkedIn.com type details.

Jobster took the natural next step and began to focus on a combination of morphing into a 'career networking' hub and massive coupon mailings and relentless hounding of users to post jobs at assorted discounts. As time passed, the career networking piece got some serious traction, Jobster raised some more money, trimmed headcount, and completely 'repurposed' the site. Along the way, they've flirted with assorted content and community offerings, though few have really floated well.

The name itself may give you indigestion, but this is an incredible place to find a very actively maintained database of corporate figures. In my estimation, this user base is devoted and unlike LinkedIn, I have yet to hit a load of dead, duplicate, or otherwise bad profiles.

Pipl.com: Grade C, with a detention for not telling people about the money.

The Pipl.com site, still in beta, boasts that it is the first people search engine exclusively focused on searching the deep web -- all of those profiles stored in databases as opposed to static web pages, and coming primarily from public records database vendors. (Can you smell an incentive structure here?)

My main issue with this site is that the search results appear to be great, but when you click through to retrieve property or other records, there's typically a link to a paid service. Plus, when I searched for myself, it found me dead,

bankrupt, and possibly living in France (none of this is true). If one clicks on the “directory” link from Pipl, however, there’s a nice little tag-based search engine that will allow you to unearth company employees and then run the search back into Pipl’s main engine.

Zabasearch.com: Grade C+, for not talking about the money, just like Pipl

Zabasearch bills itself as the internet’s number one people search engine. The study data used to produce this claim is unfortunately not available at the site (surprised?). The person behind this site is the same man behind US Search, a one-time high flying company. Like Pipl.com, the site scours public records databases, returns impressive looking results, then prompts the user to click through and pay money for most of the data.

Now I’m not saying that the data isn’t any good, but on the surface there is no disclosure that the site operates this way – just like Pipl. If you’ve got a real budget for your project, these tiny fees won’t matter, but it can be bothersome. The site scores a slightly higher grade than Pipl.com only because the company was put together by a person who has done it before, and it appears to have larger quantities of data coming into the system.

Crazedlist.org: Grade B, but possibly an F for plagiarism.

Crazedlist is a free site built by a Craigslist.org addict who was tired of searching multiple cities via multiple browser windows. What’s here is a Craigslist.org meta-search engine – search any or all locations at once. This is great for finding guitars or dates, but what’s particularly interesting is how they’ve created the first real free alternative to Monster.com for resume search.

At any given time on Craigslist, major cities present one to four thousand plus resumes – all less than ten days old (per the Craigslist ‘freshness process’ that requires reposting). Sure, Winnipeg only has 3 resumes this week, and Maine only has about 90, but Los Angeles, Boston, New York – these kinds of places are huge and hold fresh troves of information on company employees and partners, past and present.

Until Crazedlist, searching was so tedious that you might be put off entirely from using Craigslist resumes as a source research tool. As of today, that’s all changed. As for that possible ‘F’ above: the site is admittedly built on the back of Craigslist, and Craigslist already offers this service albeit in a nightmarishly burdensome fashion. If they call out Crazedlist, you may be editing your bookmark file by the end of the year.

SITES THAT SEARCH ACROSS THE NETWORKS: A QUICK ROUNDUP

An interesting little niche is getting solid trendwatcher attention: sites in the spirit of Wink.com are trying to put

a ‘new spin’ on the already ‘very new’ process of searching across the social networking sites. These players are all so young that it would seem silly to do detailed write-ups (they all have a similar purpose), but they are all worth bookmarking should you need to unearth sources via the social networking sites.

YoName.com

YoName is probably the most promising of this entire lot, and if they get better then look for them to usurp Wink.com as the go-to resource for social site search. Why? This site not only covers MySpace, Bebo and that crowd, but also MSN Spaces as well as social bookmarking communities like Digg.com. That’s quite a feat. The interface is also wonderfully simple.

UpScoop.com

UpScoop takes a different spin by asking users to import their address books and contacts, and then it will scour the networks to find resources or profiles for these individuals. Looking for sources? Simply create a new file with all of the project source names, import, and then run the query. The site supports direct import from Yahoo, Gmail, Hotmail and AOL.

SocialGrapes.com

SocialGrapes, sickeningly cute name aside, offers search that expands beyond people to include images and events. The interface is as simple as the others, and the results are often quite similar. Perhaps this will become a basic user-interface preference war, with purple and green battling it out for Web 2.0 color of the year. Note that Socialgrapes is heavily bent toward ‘socializing,’ hence the one-click ‘single women/men’ options.

Streakr.com

Streakr hasn’t officially launched yet, but early review and coverage by other beta testers indicates a service very similar to SocialGrapes and YoName, though possibly making use of a different primary color for the home page. The current site suggests that competitors are just ‘fakers’ and Streakr is the real deal. This remains to be seen.

BUT DAVE, I WANT TO NETWORK MYSELF— MUST I JOIN ALL THESE SITES?

Perhaps you’ve just read this article, wondering to yourself why you haven’t yet succumbed to the social networking craze. Maybe you already have a profile on some major site, but wish to join others or generally encounter fewer frustrations managing your online identity.

You probably just want one place to send people to let them find all of your profiles, bookmarks, web sites and so on. Sure, you could use a personal page or an email for

this, but why sharpen a spoon when people are giving away knives?

In this case, the following sites will not help you to discover sources, but rather to become the source (hey, that feels a little Zen... 'become the source'). Do note that these sites are all quite young, so expect some change and consolidation within the coming year.

ProfileLinker.com. Just like it says, link your disparate profiles together under one main umbrella, drive traffic to this site, and simplify the process of finding your online identities.

ProfileFly.com. Also just like it says, but without flight. This also includes your bookmark collections and so on. Collect, consolidate, and share with one or two clicks.

Tabber.org. Import your contacts, like UpScoop, and then get updates and centrally manage your details as well as those of your contacts. Perhaps this is will become more like UpScoop than ProfileFly, but as of today they appear to be bent toward the latter.

8Hands.com. Okay, this one is technically a download and what it does is similar to ProfileFly as well as Tabber, but it adds a few key features, such as the ability to instant message contacts via the social networks and track statistics regarding your growing contact universe. It's a great idea, but personally I don't like to install software for this kind of purpose and it's only a matter of time before the others build in these features using online widgets for such functions as messaging or photo sharing.

SocialURL.com. SocialURL is quite similar to the others above, with the main twist being that they spin the aggregation as your own 'new URL' (as in, new internet address). The service is easy to use, well managed, and appears to not focus exclusively on the kids as much as the others. Like its brethren, they also include video, photos, and other online presence resources beyond just the web page.

LinkMyBox.com. This is an interesting twist. It's like ProfileFly or ProfileLinker, but visitors can leave you comments. The idea: you take your 'box' (a small snippet of code that you place on all of your pages/sites) and when you change a page or profile, the information is updated instantly across your whole online presence. The site is a bit sparse, but it's a nice idea.

Ziki.com. This site is similar to all others above, but really is the only one of the lot targeting business users and companies versus MySpace teens, starving musicians, model

wannabes, or other internet attention seekers. The site is still young, covering roughly two thousand companies and only twelve thousand people, but the concept is solid – and somebody has got to focus on the business users, right? Don't we demand that?

A TURKEY IN EVERY OVEN!

To be honest, these sites are all full of promises, much like the technology industry in general. And wow, that's a lot of sites to check out (I was just re-reading). I selected them because they've earned "cred" with myriad reviewers and users alike, and have withstood serious volumes of user growth plus my own unforgiving review of all things internet (in which everything sucks unless proven otherwise).

This article probably doesn't even really begin to scratch the surface when considering the hundreds of other sites popping up daily around this space, from Lijit.com and Dandelife.com to the many others focused on trends like 'lifestreaming' (think Twitter.com but with way more detail). Oh, and I've not even begun to round up the foreign versions of these types of sites; there's a LinkedIn equivalent in nearly every major country. Same for the MySpace type sites.

The real challenge with these resources is finding the ones that work for you, those providing meaningful data that's reliable and useful for real ongoing projects. If you're reaching out to sources directly there is still a serious need for verification and scrubbing before migrating data into your own systems.

David Carpe is the Principal and Founder of Clew, LLC, a competitive intelligence consulting firm serving several of the world's most formidable organizations. He recently received a "2007 Future HR Leader" award recognizing his work bringing CI to corporate HR teams; he also received this award in 2005. This column was based on an edited excerpt from David's upcoming book about research. Before selling out to pursue a career in business, raise venture to start a software company, earn an MBA, and create Clew, he earned a BFA in studio art. David resides in Boston with his two sons and their one-eyed dog. He may be reached at david@clew.us, or you can find him at ResearchZilla.com, a social networking site for research wonks that he created.