



Webbmedia Group, LLC

# Searching the Social Web

by Amy L. Webb

Originally published in *Uplink*, 10.20.2007

It isn't enough to simply rely on Google to return comprehensive, relevant information. And while Google, as well as other major search engines such as Yahoo!, indexes new web pages regularly, it often misses the content that is hidden deep within discussion boards, blogs, podcasts and other social networking tools like Facebook and LinkedIn.

Part of the problem is technology: Standard search engines are programmed to look for certain bits of code on websites. The other obvious problem is volume: web pages rise within search results based on keyword relevance and the number of times users click on that particular link. So if you were working on a story about a high school football scandal, chances are pretty good that you might miss out on local chatter between students without also running a pointed search through the social web.

There are dozens of new web tools that now enable you to search across networks and deep within social networks to find information. Incorporating a handful of alternative search tools into your daily reporting routine should help you work faster, more efficiently and towards finding those esoteric bits of information that separate a good story from a spectacular achievement.

Before you go deep, keep a few things in mind. First, many people can spot a reporter without much prodding. If your story absolutely requires details about Jane Doe's personal life and you're convinced that her Facebook page is the place to visit, don't try to "friend" her without an introduction. Same goes for LinkedIn and other personal/professional social networks. On the other hand, if you think ahead and establish accounts with these popular services, you're more likely to stumble upon information that will help inform your future reporting.

Second, be honest when commenting within blog spaces or discussion forums. An easy way to find yourself blacklisted from an online community is to lurk in the background, ask an occasional question, and then publish your findings. It's okay to participate in the discussion – but share your identity, at least when acting as a reporter, with others.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

Finally, consider using search tools creatively. Below are 20 social search ideas – some may seem strange, but each will yield returns that are supplementary, or even better, than those you'd find using Google or Yahoo! alone. Try to incorporate one new search tool every day to see which on the list enhance your reporting.

### **Getting Started**

Create free accounts with LinkedIn, Facebook and MySpace. This is a quick, easy process and will give you access to the millions of other people now using these online tools. Bear in mind that if you can see someone within a social network, she can see you too – keep your profile professional.

LinkedIn is designed as a professional networking tool and is a good possible way to search for connections within your network of contacts. If you need to bypass the PR folks at Comcast and want to talk to someone directly, you may be able to find a name and phone number through someone within your network. You can also pay a premium monthly charge for the ability to email folks out of your network directly. MySpace may be more useful for finding information on groups rather than individuals, however you'll need to be a registered member before you can start trolling through its user database in earnest.

Facebook was originally created for college students, however it has recently opened to anyone. The tone of profiles on Facebook tends to be more casual, and the site offers groups and discussion boards, where users talk about issues that interest them. Examples include professional organizations (Online News Association), alumni groups (Columbia Journalism School New Media Alumni) and pages for specific topics (D.C. Tech Talk). People often post news and local events here, and that can serve as a wonderful tool to help you meet new people and to learn more about various subjects.

While all of these web tools *can* be used as reporting tools, they are primarily meant to function as social or professional networking spaces. It's best to check sites you're registered to at least once every day.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

## Search the Blogosphere

- **Blogdigger** (<http://www.blogdigger.com>)

Blogdigger is a powerful search tool that digs only through blogs to retrieve information.

**A reporter's tool:** Some bloggers/ blog sites typically break news before local journalists even hear about an event. Examples include TechCrunch and Slashdot. Find the bloggers who cover your beat and read what they're saying.

- **Technorati** (<http://www.technorati.com>)

This site indexes and tracks who's linking to who throughout the blogosphere.

**A reporter's tool:** You can search by keyword, by broad topic, by blog name and by Technorati user. An easy way to develop reporting on a specific topic would be to simply follow links.

- **Everyzing** (<http://www.everyzing.com/>)

Originally called *Podzinger*, this site indexes video and audio content.

**A reporter's tool:** Search by keyword – results are returned with the sentence where the keyword occurred and the time on the audio or video track. Rather than listening through an entire 45 minute podcast of a Hillary Clinton speech on health care, you could “zing” it to find the exact phrase and surrounding context – and then play the recording from that point forward.

## Search the Zeitgeist

- **Omgili** (<http://www.omgili.com>)

Search through what people are saying in forums and discussion boards.

**A reporter's tool:** What are people saying about this particular topic? Are they mentioning other names/ companies/ websites? Will they point you more towards what you're researching?

- **Pixy** (<http://www.pixy.com>)

Mega-search for images and videos on dozens of journalism/ news sources, now divided by category.

**A reporter's tool:** Need to find a video to accompany your online story and have only 10 minutes left before deadline? You may have an easier time searching for video files here than on YouTube.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

- **StumbleUpon (<http://www.stumbleupon.com>)**  
StumbleUpon is actually a toolbar that can be installed on any web browser and, based on a set of your preferences, delivers new web pages you may like.

**A reporter's tool:** Just as looking through the footnotes of SEC reports can produce interesting story ideas, so too can rummaging through user comments. See what other people have said about a particular website and if their comments are relevant to your story.

- **Wikirage (<http://www.wikirage.com>)**  
This site tracks pages in Wikipedia that are currently receiving the most traffic and edits.

**A reporter's tool:** When a story breaks, it may be worthwhile to check out what users are contributing at Wikipedia to help inform your own reporting.

## Search People

- **Spock (<http://www.spock.com>)**  
Spock is now in public beta and delivers thorough results on people. It pulls content from other websites and allows users to enter their own information, wiki-style.

**A reporter's tool:** Because this is a wiki, people have the ability to enter and edit information about themselves. Additionally, others may edit information, too, so you may be more likely to find leads on people here than by using a simple Google search.

- **Pipl (<http://pipl.com/>)**  
Pipl searches the deep web to find information hidden within databases and other areas that standard web crawlers can't or won't search.

**A reporter's tool:** This search engine aggregates databases for you, which can be a plus when searching for information on deadline.

- **Wink (<http://www.wink.com>)**  
Wink is a smart search tool that pulls information only from social network sites such as MySpace, LinkedIn, Bebo and Friendster.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

**A reporter's tool:** This is an easy, efficient way to search through social networks, however you will need to enter both a name and a location.

- **ZoomInfo (<http://www.Zoominfo.com>)**  
ZoomInfo offers two search strategies, free and paid.

**A reporter's tool:** The site is geared to recruiters, but it offers plenty of leads for reporters, too. You can search by person, by a person within a company, or just by a company.

### Search Across Networks

- **Infopirate (<http://www.infopirate.com>)**  
Infopirate allows users to share their bookmarks.

**A reporter's tool:** Use bookmarks to look up information on individuals or companies.

- **Sputtr (<http://www.sputtr.com>)**  
Sputtr offers single search window with many different options: Type in "Second Life" and search through YouTube, Flickr, Digg, etc. by selecting your button of choice.

**A reporter's tool:** Use this to find multimedia files very quickly.

- **Whonu (<http://www.whonu.com>)**  
At Whonu, search through images, videos, news, maps, blogs, books, calendars, notebooks and more. After, you can share or bookmark your search results.

**A reporter's tool:** If your newsroom doesn't have an intranet, you can potentially use Whonu as a way to share reporting resources on a particular story, on a beat or on a geographic area.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

### More Search Ideas

- **Midomi** (<http://www.midomi.com>)

Need to find the name, title and artist of a song fast – but only remember the tune? Midomi allows you to hum a few bars of a song into your computer and it matches your rendition to its database, returning the original song information.

**PolyCola** (<http://www.polycola.com>)

Offers a split-screen view with different search engine combinations.

Amy L. Webb is principal consultant at Webbmedia Group, LLC, a digital media consulting firm. Her team shows news organizations how to adapt technology for journalism. She blogs at <http://www.mydigimedia.com> and can be reached at [amy@webbmediagroup.com](mailto:amy@webbmediagroup.com).