Facebook’s graph search is scary

Nathan Madden

Profiling Facebook-style makes creating random strangers even more convenient. It’s like as Facebook Graph Search, this aspect of the social media network is still being beta-tested and allows you to search for people by what they do or who they are related to where they work and where they live—among other things.

Although Facebook users do have publicly viewable profiles, if you wanted to find out what someone liked before this, you’d often have to find them by name and look through their profile—after they gave you permission to access it. Now if you want to search “women who are married” and add some specific criteria like “likes stripping” and “lives in New York City,” you can. Some of the searches are a little funny—“mothers of Jews who like bacon” was an example given by Scott, a British comedian randomly selected to beta-test Graph Search.

Some of them, though, are frightening—and give startling glimpses of our behavior, our interests, and aspects of their profile that they didn’t realize they had to stay hidden. Graph Search is dangerous, and it’s important to remember that lots of people are underestimating how it communicates the information found through searching processes used by Facebook.

Scott highlights other uses of Graph Search in his Tumblr feed, Actual Facebook Graph Searches.

Among other things, he searched “married people who like prostitution” and “current employees of people who like racism.” A more troubling experiment was “men who like Transparent, Israel, and Islamic law,” which opens up a whole new era of woman in the form of minority discrimination and identification.

Ultimately, these searches focus on information that should be able to be restricted and could act as new tools for extremist groups and oppressive governments.

Facebook has never been the perfect picture of privacy, but people should be able to expect at least a little sense of security about how their information is accessed and what strange men can see. Nowadays, you can be found through networks they place themselves in friends, they have in common with the searcher and their name, which limits the potential searchers to a few degrees of separation from the subject of the search. Because Facebook is merely a searchable database, it opens up the potential for anyone to use identifying information about them to be high or low priority, which is at least as invasive as accessing an account.

This increased exposure of people’s private information is dangerous, reduces any sense of privacy offered by Facebook to almost nil and foreshadows how the network is working to make information accessible to as many people as possible, including total strangers.

Graph Search and its potential applications might not be a horrible thing if most people placed safeguards on their information or users who searched for things only used it for positive applications—like maybe starting support groups or reconnections with old friends. However, information has shown that when people are given the opportunity to share too much, they will take advantage of every chance to talk about the world every time they post or like a post in social. Beyond that, people can’t be trusted to handle the abundance of information. Facebook has proven to be a very effective tool for internet stalkers. A search might be existing extramural and if you don’t know someone’s name, you just have to know their Facebook information about them, some of which could be guessed or seen as access.

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According to Scott, who wrote the article, “I think about feminism and the fear the US military instills in some of the women. It’s scary. They’re afraid of everything. They’re not allowed to have friends. They’re not allowed to have a life. They’re not allowed to have any control over their own lives.”

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