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Facebook users listed for search

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SOCIAL networking site Facebook, which signs up more than a million new users every month, has changed tack and begun to publicly list members' profiles on search engines such as Google and Yahoo!

"This move transforms Facebook from a social network into a quasi White Pages of the web," IT expert Om Malik says.

Facebook is in fact aiming to get in early in the race to build a global - and lucrative - online directory containing as many personal details as possible, such as one's CV, contact details, hobbies and even friends.

Currently 200,000 people sign up to Facebook every day and it now has 42 million users, according to the site. Newspaper reports say it aims to have 60 million members by the end of the year.

In the three years since it was created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, then a student at Harvard University, Facebook has burst into the global consciousness, becoming a kind of vast private online directory.

Its moves to make its members' profiles public means, however, they could be found by anyone using common internet search engines.

Unless a Facebook user actively opts out of the scheme, their picture and name will from now on be available to non-registered web surfers.

"One of the great features of Facebook was privacy. You could be assured that what was in Facebook remained in Facebook. However, that illusion might be ending soon," Malik says.

Several other sites are already positioning themselves in this market for a global online directory, such as [Spock.com](#), which has indexed more than 100 million people and says it is "building the broadest and deepest people-specific search engine".

The automatic site trawls public websites to collect, index and display information that it finds online about individuals.

Its success has translated into billions of dollars raised from investors in past months, while other companies are hungrily eyeing up the site.

The Wall Street Journal recently reported that Microsoft was mulling an investment of up to 5 per cent in Facebook, at a price that would make the site already worth some \$US10 billion. The paper says Microsoft had been in contact with Facebook over the past few weeks, adding a 5 per cent stake could be valued at between \$US300 and \$US500 million.

Sources also told the newspaper that Google had expressed "strong interest" in a possible Facebook investment, and a company showdown could be on the cards.

Facebook is not alone in its aims to set up an online directory.

PeekYou says it has some 50.3 million names on its index, while Wink boasts some 217 million, mostly culled from popular social networking sites such as MySpace, LinkedIn and Friendster.

Upscoop, created by the company Rampleaf, has indexed millions of profiles, and will go through your online contact list for free to see which sites your friends are using, as long as you provide the password to your email address.

The main aim of all these sites is to attract advertising, with made-to-measure ads for each web user.

AFP