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Coffee, Cocktails and Commentary

The search by Spock

by [Jacob Grier](#) on July 10, 2007

This week I was invited to join a cool new people search engine called [Spock](#). Tim O'Reilly [sums it up](#) better than I can:

You can search for a specific person — but you can do that on Google. More importantly, you can search for a class of person, say politicians, or people associated with a topic — say Ruby on Rails. The spock robot automatically creates tags for any person it finds (and it gathers information on people from Wikipedia, social networking sites like LinkedIn...) but it also lets users add tags of their own, and vote existing tags up or down to strengthen the associations between people and topics. Users can also identify relationships between people (friend, co-worker, etc.), upload pictures, and provide other types of information. This is definitely a site that will get better as more people use it — one of my key tests for Web 2.0. It also illustrates the heart of a new development paradigm: using programs to populate a database, and people to improve it.

And it does that pretty well. When I logged in, the Spock bot had already tagged me accurately: single; Bachelor's degree; International Brotherhood of Magicians; class of 2004; likes sailing; likes philosophy; likes politics; likes golf; likes Music; Friendster; Vanderbilt University; from Spring TX; Food & Beverages; Coffee Professional; single; atheist; athletic; college graduate; White / Caucasian; Cancer (sign); straight

That all comes from social networking sites. The problem is I'm spread across three profiles. One profile is from Friendster and LinkedIn, one is from MySpace, and one is the one I signed up with. It's supposed to be possible to merge these all into one, but that feature is a little buggy right now.

A second difficulty the site has is telling people apart. It seems to succeed for people with unique names, but maybe not for common ones. Take a search for [Patrick Michaels](#), one of the Cato Institute's environment experts. The biography appears accurate but these three photos are attached to the profile:



There's clearly something wrong here. The guy on the left [runs a travel company](#). The guy on the right is a [lawyer in Michigan](#). The guy in the middle matches the bio. They're all Patrick Michaels.

This is where the voting comes in. Beside each of the photos is a small arrow. Clicking on it calls up a prompt to vote yes or no on the photo. By voting no on the two inaccurate photos, I bumped them off the profile. By voting yes on the middle one, I made it the default photo. A trail showing who has voted on the photo lends a little accountability. This is what O'Reilly is talking about when he mentions populating a database with programs and improving it with people. The interesting question is whether this will be enough to keep the site accurate. Another is how much control individuals will be able to exercise over their own information. (Spock is addressing the problem of entity resolution with a [prize](#).)

The downside here is the possibility of false or private information getting out without the knowledge of the people involved. It potentially puts ordinary people in the position John Siegenthaler faced with his grossly inaccurate Wikipedia biography. But unlike Siegenthaler, most of us can't call up our friends at *USA Today* and place a [cantankerous column](#) correcting the mistake.

Of course, people can libel each other on the internet without Spock. The self-correcting nature of the site arguably makes it safer than other online sources. The potential problem is with users taking it to be more authoritative than they should. A bigger problem might be true information about jobs, relationships, or sexual preferences becoming more public than individuals would like.

I tend to take [David Brin's view](#) that greater transparency is inevitable and that it's better to embrace that than to be delusional about one's privacy. If you've got an online identity, odds are you're profiled on Spock. And the best way to control that information is to get in early and clean it up.

Spock is invitation only while it's in beta and I've got a lot of invites to give away. Leave a comment or send an email if you want one.

Finally, props to Spock for the [FedEx-like](#) logo that sports a subtle graphic that absolutely stands out once you notice it's there.

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[Tommy Keswick](#) [07.10.07 at 3:37 am](#)

I'd love to check this out, Jacob. I've got quite a web presence and am eager to see what it has gathered about me.



[Jacob Grier](#) [07.10.07 at 9:27 am](#)

Just sent it.

[Kate Zwaard](#) [07.10.07 at 10:26 am](#)

Would love to try this. Thanks for the blog — it's great!



[Matt Novak](#) [07.10.07 at 3:22 pm](#)

I'd also love to take a closer look at this. Thanks!



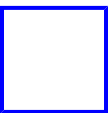
[Barzelay](#) [07.10.07 at 7:46 pm](#)

Hey, you know I want to check it out. Good find. Sounds awesome.

[Jeff](#) [07.11.07 at 1:12 pm](#)

I wonder if this is going to turn out as well as the last time you (albeit inadvertently) made such an offer...

Sure, I'll take one.



Jacob Grier [07.11.07 at 1:41 pm](#)

We can only hope. At least this time I should have enough to give away.




Aarti [07.11.07 at 3:46 pm](#)

Glad to hear you dig the Spock.com. Their official launch is very soon.



Barzelay [07.11.07 at 5:02 pm](#)

I yearn for Spock.



Jacob Grier [07.11.07 at 5:18 pm](#)

You should have already received an invite. I've sent one to all who commented.



Anastasia [09.19.07 at 5:33 pm](#)

excellent post, jacob. i got on spock through that beta invitation thing too. spock's functioning invites the obvious comparisons to wikipedia's self-correcting open-source mechanisms. but i'm skeptical here because the vast majority of individuals will not be very well-known, and so won't draw the kind of traffic to their pages that "notable" individuals and concepts invite on wikipedia. you have to have a critical mass for open source to function well, you know?

as for websites that aggregate disparate online profiles into one, check this shiz out: <http://www.profilebuilder.com/>

you create a single profile, and it populates all your other profiles for you. way to get back in control!



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Jacob Grier is a freelance writer, barista, bartender, and magician in Portland, OR. He writes, eats, and drinks a lot. His articles have appeared in *The Washington Post*, Reason Online, *The Oregonian*, and other publications. He currently runs the bar program at Carlyle restaurant.

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