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Searching For John Q. Public

New people-search engines hope to do better than Google in finding the less-than-famous

Jay Bhatti thinks he has spotted Google's ([GOOG](#)) weakness. The search Goliath isn't good with people. A Google search for an individual may return tens of thousands of links in milliseconds, but it's hard to tell unless you click on one if it's the person you're looking for. The results list won't distinguish between, say, James Brown the soul singer and James Brown the sportscaster.



That's where Bhatti's company, Spock, comes in. His people-specialized search engine, scheduled for public launch the first week of August, scans social networks such as LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook, and other sites where people regularly post information about themselves and others. It then pulls that information into a concise summary about a person, such as his occupation, interests, age, marital status, and hometown. A click on the summary reveals related Web sites and known associates.

Spock is one of dozens of niche search companies trying to capture some of the more than \$60 billion that is projected to be spent on search marketing over the next four years. Bhatti wants Spock to become the site you visit to find details on a particular individual. "Searching for people in a general search engine is like trying to look for a needle in a haystack," says Bhatti, Spock's co-founder.

Specialization may be the only viable strategy for search startups. Google's lead in general search seems insurmountable. Nearly 50% of all searches are done on Google, according to June figures from market researcher comScore ([SCOR](#)). Its share has remained high despite competition from Yahoo! ([YHOO](#)) (25.1% of searches) and Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) (13.2%).

In some niches, the search game is still a wide-open field. The key is identifying the right niche. Travel, health, and finance are already crowded with competitors. In personal search, however, there is no clear victor. Startups include Wink, which is similar to Spock, and ZoomInfo, a search engine specializing in executives. They're gunning for the

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roughly 30% of the 7 billion-plus Web searches performed in the U.S. each month that relate to individuals. About half of those queries concern celebrities. The other half target names that don't have a million Web mentions: business contacts, former friends, ex-lovers, and the like.

These people-search engines sound like a stalker's dream come true. But Spock and other such sites contend they return information a Web surfer could eventually find anyway; they just highlight it more effectively. And they don't list phone numbers and addresses. But privacy advocates say that many people who fill social network pages with personal information falsely believe that only their "friends" will see it—or at least only users of that social network. Typically, social networks require people to have an account to read posts and visit users' profile pages. However, unless a user specifies that his or her profile is private, it can be indexed by search engines. Even private profiles have some publicly searchable information, such as the user's name, photo, gender, age, and hometown. "What people haven't understood...is that information they thought was being limited to the people in their networks is accessible to search engines that can crawl through these sites," says Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington.

The big search engines are ill-designed to highlight information on little-known people. Google, for example, returns results based on the prominence of search terms in a given Web page and the number of sites linking to that page, among other things. It's a great model for finding authoritative sources about oft-discussed people such as Michael Jordan the basketball player. It's not so great when you're searching for information about a guy by the same name who's toiling away in an office building in Utah.

Of course, the guy in Utah may not want to be found. So Spock and Wink say they give users better control of their online identities by showing them personal info online they may not know about. Whether that's a sufficient reason for people to switch from Googling themselves and start ego-surfing via Spock or Wink remains to be seen.

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Nickname: Paul

Review: It is interesting to see how many niche search companies there are now, and I agree that it will be an opportunity for smaller companies to take back some of Google's market share. People search is most definitely an opportunity and a valuable service. I have used Wink for over half a year since its release, and Spock's invite-only beta for the past couple of months, and I prefer Wink. I saw a presentation on Spock at a conference a while ago and the demo looked very similar to Wink, but once I logged into Spock I quickly realized why was still a beta. I will use Wink for now, thanks.

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By Catherine Holahan

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