

Spock - Vertical Search Done Right

Written by [Alex Iskold](#) / June 26, 2007 6:10 AM / [11 Comments](#)

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There has been quite a lot of buzz lately around a vertical search engine for people, called *Spock*. While still in private impressed users with its rich feature set and social aspects. Yet, there is something that has gone almost unnoticed - vertical semantic search engines built so far. There are four things that makes their approach special:

- The person-centric perspective of a query
- Rich set of attributes that characterize people (geography, birthday, occupation, etc.)
- Usage of tags as links or relationships between people
- Self-correcting mechanism via user feedback loop

Spock's focus on people

The only kind of search result that you get from Spock is a list of people; and it interprets any query as if it is about you. If you search for *democrats* or *ruby on rails* or *new york*, the results will be lists of people associated with the query. The algorithm is probably a flavor of the page rank or frequency analysis algorithm used by Google - but tailored to people.

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☆ **George W. Bush** male, 60 years old (Washington, DC, United States)
[President of the United States](#) ▾ [Christian](#) ▾ [Republican](#) ▾ [miserable](#) ▾
[United States House of Representatives candidate](#) ▾ [President of the U.S.](#)
[president bush](#) ▾ [war president](#) ▾ [43rd President of the United States](#) ▾

George Walker Bush (born 6 July 1946) is the 43rd and current president

See: [Tags \(97\)](#) | [Pictures \(12\)](#) | [Related People \(23\)](#) | [Contact](#)

Web: [Wikipedia](#) | [whitehouse.gov](#) | [Wikipedia](#) | [politicalhumor.about.com](#)



☆ **Bill Clinton** male, 60 years old (New York, NY, United States)
[sex scandal](#) ▾ [former U.S. President](#) ▾ [womanizer](#) ▾ [President of the U.S.](#)
[Baptist from the United States](#) ▾ [Impeachment in the United States](#) ▾ [S](#)
[Add tag](#)

William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton (born William Jefferson Blythe III on August 19, 1946)

See: [Tags \(57\)](#) | [Pictures \(20\)](#) | [Related People \(31\)](#) | [Contact](#)

Web: [Wikipedia](#) | [clintonfoundation.org](#) | [Clinton Global Initiative](#) | [Clinton](#)

Rich semantics, tags and relationships

As a vertical engine, Spock knows important attributes that people have. Even in the beta stage, the set is quite rich. Occupation and location just to name a few. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Spock is its usage of tags. First, the tags that Spock extracts via its crawler become tags. In addition, users can also add tags. So Spock leverages a combination of crawler tags and people power for tagging.

Related people



A special kind of tag in Spock is called 'relationships' - and it's the secret sauce that glues people together. For example, Chelsea Clinton is related to George W. Bush because she is his daughter, but Bush is related to Clinton because he is the successor to the president. The key thing here is that relationships are explicit in Spock. These relationships taken together weave a complex web between people that is completely realistic. Spock gives us a glimpse of how semantics emerge out of the simple.

Feedback loops

The voting aspect of Spock also harnesses the power of automation and people. It is a simple, yet very interesting feature that is added into the system. Spock is experimenting with letting people vote on the existing "facts" (tags/relationships) and it automatically updates to reflect the votes. To be fair, the system is not yet tuned to do this correctly all the time - it's hard to know right now. It is clear that a flavor of this approach in the near future will 'teach' computers what the right answer is.



Limitations of Spock's approach

The techniques that we've discussed are very impressive, but they have limitations. The main problem is that Spock has much more complete information about celebrities and well known people than about ordinary people. The reason for this is that more people are going to be tagging and voting on the president of the United States than on ordinary people. Spock breaks out and becomes so viral that a lot of local communities form - much like on Facebook. While it's possible that this does not seem to likely. But even if Spock just becomes a search engine that works best for famous people, it is still a very powerful.

Conclusion

Spock is fascinating because of its focus and leverage of semantics. Using tags as relationships and the feedback loop for voting has great potential to grow a learning system organically, in the manner that learning systems evolve in nature. It is pragmatic and instantly useful.

Comments

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Spock will also create a huge database of "ordinary" people, too. I was known to the system - they're aggregating Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn. They have less known people, too. I was known to the system - the

it included my name, age, country and MySpace-profile.

If they start to index more resources, like domains (who owns which domains), blogs (there are millions of them...), more search engines, more social media, more web in general, they're on the best way to actually become a search engine for everybody.

Also, don't underestimate the fact that everybody will at least tag himself. That's our ego! :)

Posted by: Sebastian | [June 26, 2007 6:46 AM](#)

2. I agree that there's huge potential for Spock, and that it is very well done.

Potential downside? If Spock does hit I can envision employers and recruiters making extensive use of it to check up on/geek out on employees/prospects - which might not be such a good thing for some.

Posted by: Chris | [June 26, 2007 7:26 AM](#)

3. spock is gonna take alot of money to market that domain. the name is terrible. spook is better. spoke is better. you would think a common sense vertical web address like mylocator.com or something. the world does not need another website that you have to explain. a vertical done right needs no explanation to location. change the name. I like spoke better.

Posted by: [steven emery](#) | [June 26, 2007 9:11 AM](#)

4. What the fuck is this?!?
semenatic who? Dont they make antivirus ?
Why would they want to do search engine.

they cant tell me who stole my screwdriver but I know it was claxton before he left that POS.

Posted by: Mike Hulubinka | [June 26, 2007 10:50 AM](#)

5. Pretty interesting technology. One of the default queries behind the log-in is "people killed by handguns." I think the feedback loop is a quality control mechanism, assuming it's not terribly prone to abuse; it's also a lot of fun to play with!

I think I still have a couple invitations if anyone is interested in trying it out.

Posted by: [Cortland Coleman](#) | [June 26, 2007 8:23 PM](#)

6. I am not excited by spock because its business objective is meaningless. it is a good tool to kill time. however, google is a better tool.

Posted by: [keanu](#) | [June 26, 2007 8:59 PM](#)

7. Well, I would like to make an interesting comment, but when I went to their site it was down for maintenance.

A portent?

Posted by: [Alan Marks](#) | [June 27, 2007 6:15 AM](#)

8. I had the same experience as Alan but now Spock's back up it appears that it's invitation only. As current users are able to invite others, it would be great if some generous person could send me an invitation! jason (at) talktoshiba.com

Posted by: [Jason](#) | [June 28, 2007 2:20 AM](#)

9. hai all spocker

Posted by: rmpal | July 3, 2007 5:22 AM

10. If you want free spock invites go to <http://www.swapinvites.com/>

Posted by: Nathan | July 11, 2007 10:55 AM

11. Crawling the web does not always lead to good results...search on spock.com for "Christian" and just wonder about the res

Posted by: wayne | August 14, 2007 3:19 AM