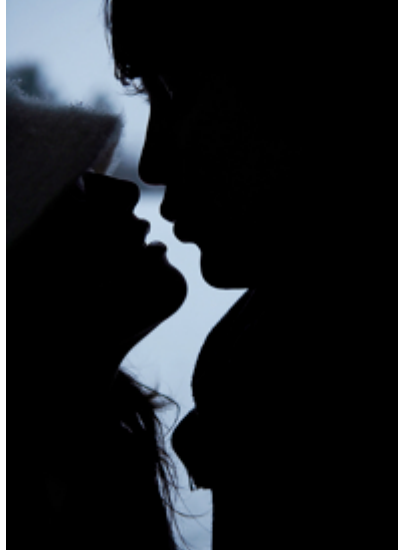




Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on January 11, 2012

Google's New Personal Search Results Feature Raises Concerns

The company's six-month-old Plus product is a social networking service Google offered to counter the sweeping popularity of Facebook's online parlor and Twitter's status-updating hub. The new feature, called "Search, Plus Your World," was partially activated Tuesday (some users will not see the change immediately) for all searches administered by users logged into Google; deactivating the individually catered results will require changing settings under the user's personal preferences. Personal search results can also be suspended on a search-by-search basis by clicking an icon on the results page.



Google Fellow Amit Singhal detailed in a [blog post](#) three areas that will be affected by the new feature:

1. **Personal Results**, which enable you to find information just for you, such as Google+ photos and posts — both your own and those shared specifically with you, that only you will be able to see on your results page;
2. **Profiles in Search**, both in autocomplete and results, which enable you to immediately find people you're close to or might be interested in following; and,
3. **People and Pages**, which help you find people profiles and Google+ pages related to a specific topic or area of interest, and enable you to follow them with just a few clicks. Because behind most every query is a community.

"For instance," *The Blaze* [notes](#), "a query about the San Francisco 49ers might include links and comments made about the football team by other people in one of the social circles on the user's Plus account." Or "a search request that includes the name of a dog owned by the user or a friend might turn up photos of the pet that have been posted on Plus and Picasa."

"This is going to open up a whole new avenue in search," asserted Ben Gomes, another Google fellow.

While the company seeks to make its search engine even more useful, the addition could unnerve users who realize how much information is being gathered about them.

The *Los Angeles Times* [quoted](#) Danny Sullivan, longtime Google observer and editor of SearchEngineLand.com, as calling the feature "one of the most significant things Google has ever done in search." However, Sullivan aired some concerns he has with the service: "Until now we have not had the mixture of our personal information with our Web search results, and that makes even me a bit nervous."

Others have echoed Sullivan's discerning sentiments. James Grimmelman, a professor at New York Law School who practices in Internet law, [wrote](#) on Twitter, "Today is a good day to turn off Google+ and delete your Google Profile. I just did."



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In a phone interview, Grimmelmann added, "I don't like it. I don't like it for its effect on competition, and I don't like it for what it does to people's privacy. It breaks down a very clear conceptual divide between things that are private and things that are public online." He pointed out that many Google users may find the feature confusing, and that the service could open a door to a "sense of erosion of their privacy."

Not only have individual critics evinced their concerns, but so have other social networking sites, such as Twitter, which [issued a statement](#) suggesting that the addition could generate some unintended consequences:

For years, people have relied on Google to deliver the most relevant results anytime they wanted to find something on the Internet. Often, they want to know more about world events and breaking news. Twitter has emerged as a vital source of this real-time information, with more than 100 million users sending 250 million Tweets every day on virtually every topic. As we've seen time and time again, news breaks first on Twitter; as a result, Twitter accounts and Tweets are often the most relevant results. We're concerned that as a result of Google's changes, finding this information will be much harder for everyone. We think that's bad for people, publishers, news organizations and Twitter users.

Facebook has yet to comment on the feature, which could be attributed partly to a similar resistance it met when it rolled out its "Timeline" feature, which hatched an array of privacy concerns. Like Facebook's recent addition, Google isn't requesting permission from users, but automatically activating it for all English-speaking users, which will be fully launched over the next few days. If you don't want the feature, you have to take the step of turning it off yourself.

Previous privacy invasions led to summons for both Google and Facebook before the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, which resulted in settlements and agreements that require both companies to adhere to external audits of their privacy procedures every other year.



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