

AOL launches video search service

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http://news.com.com/AOL+launches+video+search+service/2100-1032_3-5770777.html

Story last modified Thu Jun 30 17:50:00 PDT 2005

America Online quietly launched a new video-on-demand search service Thursday, opening the doors for millions of Internet users to view music videos, news segments and other content from parent company Time Warner, whose mountain of media holdings gives AOL an advantage over rivals Google and Yahoo.

The beta service, called AOL Video, offers free access to search and playback for more than 15,000 licensed and originally produced video assets from Time Warner, including television programs and music videos, movie trailers from Warner Bros. and news clips from CNN, MSNBC and others. AOL's Singingfish multimedia search engine, which the company acquired two years ago, will complement the new service by pointing visitors to audio and video from across the Web.

AOL will announce the test service Tuesday, but it can be previewed by visiting AOL.com's new beta home page, and clicking on the video search tab. On Tuesday, AOL is also expected to announce it is developing a video hub, which is a specialized page for watching the latest multimedia content. It is expected to launch this summer.

"Today, AOL begins rolling out their new, improved, and free video search service (beta) and so far, pardon the pun, I like what I see," Gary Price of SearchEngineWatch.com wrote in a blog.

Though still a test, AOL Video is the company's biggest, most comprehensive effort to court Web surfers with a free pass to Time Warner entertainment and media video assets, which have been available only to AOL members. As the company has faced subscriber losses for dial-up and broadband service, it has retrenched with plans to migrate content and services to the Web in order to boost traffic and sell lucrative video advertisements.

The plan is particularly important to AOL as it seeks to cash in on a resurgence in online advertising that's been driven largely by search-marketing giants Yahoo and Google. Online video advertising is seen by market analysts as a big growth market.

But at least one industry watcher took a skeptical view of the AOL service.

"I'm not convinced that just because you have content you own, that it will make you better in search," said John Battelle, who wrote a book on Web search that will be published in September. "On the other hand, they did buy Singingfish, so they are serious about this market."

Google and Yahoo have both introduced video search engines in the last six months. Google started offering playback of video clips from Unicef, Greenpeace, CNET

Networks and others for the first time last week with the use of a proprietary downloadable player. Google did not disclose how much material its database holds, but the company is regularly soliciting new partners. Yahoo doesn't provide a playback feature.

AOL is banking on free on-demand video to be its trump card. As Google and Yahoo have engaged in a search-technology features war over the last year, AOL has slowly mixed more of its content into Web search as a means to gain an edge in the marketplace.

Already, AOL's video search engine has access to 15,000 pieces of content, with an average playback length of three minutes, from Universal, Dow Jones, Reuters and the Associated Press. AOL also plays back the content in a proprietary video player, which supports technology already installed on PCs, but visitors do not have to download an application.

AOL has an advantage in the search-video game with its advertising capabilities and breadth of content. The company has strong ties to Hollywood through its parent company's Warner Bros. studios, among other properties, and can leverage that to outdo video assets from Google and Yahoo. The company is also selling and running 15-second commercials that will run before a select group of Time Warner-owned video clips.

The technology for AOL Video includes speech-to-text processing that enables not only searches by title, description and artist but also searches for keywords within the body of the video. The technology combines internal software developed by AOL and its Singingfish.

Singingfish specializes in scouring the Web for video and audio clips and then pointing visitors to sites where they can play back the media. In recent weeks, Singingfish announced a slew of content partnerships with companies such as Atom-Films, CBSNews.com, Hollywood.com, Like Television, ManiaTV.com, MarketWatch and The One Network.

Yahoo, which launched a finalized version of its video search in May, boasts strong Hollywood ties in CEO Terry Semel, a former Warner Bros. chief. But the company has said that it has no plans for now to let visitors play back video from its search engine. Yahoo is also forming a media group based in Santa Monica, Calif., to house various entertainment property and to court Hollywood.

Expanding from offering text search into copyrighted audio and video, however, puts the search providers in legal peril. Earlier on Thursday, Google raced to remove links to downloadable copyrighted content, including the "The Matrix Revolutions" and episodes of the "Family Guy" cartoons, from its video search service. They had been uploaded by the public.

The risks became greater after Monday's Supreme Court ruling that made companies legally liable for copyright piracy that takes place on their networks.