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Yahoo tests video search engine

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Yahoo has unveiled a video search engine to serve the growing appetite for multimedia entertainment online.

As previously reported, the Web portal has been developing a service that will let people search for video clips from across the Internet in much the way they do for Web pages and images. Late Wednesday, the company introduced the beta site, which searches for files in Microsoft's Windows Media, Apple Computer's QuickTime and RealNetwork's Real Media.

The test comes as the major search providers quietly prepare similar services. CNET News.com reported earlier this month that Google is secretly recording and indexing TV programming to make shows searchable online, much the way it brings library books to the Web. Microsoft, too, is developing a platform and search engine for searchable video that would allow people using the Internet or a television to find broadband or on-demand media.

America Online recently updated its multimedia engine Singingfish and has incorporated video search into its main site.

"They've all been circling around it," said Mika Salmi, founder of AtomFilms, a film site that is working with Yahoo to make its videos searchable.

Video search is hitting prime time for several reasons. Many people now have high-speed Internet access at home and work, and are warming to online video now that it's not excruciatingly choppy and slow. The costs of creating, hosting and delivering video have also dropped, making more multimedia available.

Finally, the Internet is maturing into an entertainment platform for television, via convergence devices that combine PC and TV features, and search will be essential for people to find and watch media, whether it's available over broadband, pay-per-view cable or broadcast.

For search providers, offering searchable video is an extremely attractive new market because it not only keeps them relevant to consumers hungry for multimedia, but it also helps them appeal to brand advertisers, which spend about \$60 billion annually on commercials. Major TV advertisers are comfortable with the effects of commercials, and they're likely to wake up to Internet opportunities once on-demand video is ubiquitous.

As a result, Yahoo, Google and others are already courting Hollywood to cinch relationships. Their courtship will be essential in building business models for video advertising, distribution and content sales--all hurdles to making multimedia search a success.

"We're going to be reaching out to the entertainment and broadcast industry...to deliver the best video search out there," said Jeff Weiner, Yahoo's senior vice president of search and marketplace.

Aside from relationships, Yahoo is relying on proprietary technology and industry cooperation to bake its video search service. The company will promote a new media standard, called Really Simple Syndication (RSS) Media, in partnership with Creative Commons, Broadband Mechanics, AtomFilms and others.

The proposed system builds on a standard for syndicating content to other Web sites by allowing publishers to add text, or metatags, to their media files. That way, the RSS feeds can be sent to Yahoo for indexing in the search engine. Eventually, Yahoo said, the system could be used to let people aggregate video feeds on a personalized Web page, for example.

"Enclosures in RSS are already being used to syndicate audio files (Podcasting) and images. Media RSS extends enclosures to handle other media types, such as short films or TV," according to a description from Yahoo. "Media RSS enables content publishers and bloggers to broadly distribute descriptions of and links to multimedia content."

The standard could help solve one of the obstacles to indexing files that have little text associated with them. Otherwise, Yahoo has developed a technology to extract searchable text from headers and other data associated with media, and it plans to use speech-recognition technology to delve deeper into video in later stages of the product.

"We're announcing support for Media RSS to allow individuals, publishers and content owners to alert us to their content," said Bradley Horowitz, Yahoo's director of multimedia search and desktop, who was hired in the last year. Horowitz was the founder of video search technology Virage and is a graduate of MIT's Media lab.

For companies like AtomFilms, the search service could mean more Web traffic, and as a result, more advertising revenue. The company sells commercial-like ads that appear as a video loads in the background. It charges between \$20 and \$35 per thousand ads, nearly five times the average cost of banner ads.

"We're disadvantaged when it comes to search engines because we don't have a lot of text," Salmi said. "This is playing into our strengths."

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