

Background

Google recently launched 'Search Plus Your World' (SPYW), which massively raised the stakes in its move towards ever more personalized search. It means that searchers who have a personal Google+ page may see personal items in the search results, such as private pictures from their own or a friend's profile. It also means that, in general, pages from Google+ will receive much greater prominence on the results page. Essentially this is just an evolution in Google's move towards results that are filtered by user, but the way it has been done has raised some eyebrows.

Details

The reactions to 'SPYW' have been mixed. Some view it as the next evolution in merging the search and social experiences. Others view it as another effort by Google to bias their "objective" search pages to force greater adoption of Google+, consolidating their near-monopoly on search while beginning to put the squeeze on Facebook and Twitter in the social space.

Whilst there are some factors that make the SPYW appealing, not the least a theoretical increase in hyper relevant search results and greater geo-targeted content, the prominence given to Google+ results, does make it feel rather forced when considering its size in terms of audience and traffic relative to Facebook, Twitter etc.

Implications

Currently 'SPYW' only affects the 25% of users who search on Google.com, in English, whilst logged into a Google product. They will have the option of seeing search results that are customized to their interests and connections, though they will have to opt-out if they don't want to.

Whilst this is only a minority of users at present, it seems certain Google will push this product out to a wider audience. If nothing else, it would appear, at first glance, to be a good way of bringing Google+'s audience size somewhat nearer to Twitter's (it will take a lot more to get it up to Facebook's 800 million). It's also likely to increase calls from many marketers for brands to get Google+ profiles up and running in order to rank in these new results.

There have however already been calls from privacy groups for Google to roll back the new product. The current FTC probe into whether Google is misusing its dominant position in search, will now take into account the effect of 'SPYW' due to the fact that the likes of Twitter and Facebook don't get the same kind of "bump" that Google+ profiles get. Google claim this is because the other social platforms won't work with them. Claims of course denied by Facebook and Twitter.

Summary

It's obvious that Google+ is still a nascent platform compared to Facebook; it is still too early to predict the success of "SPYW". However, what's clear is that Google believes that its future business will be dependent on creating a search engine delivering truly personal results, and before some combination of Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft does it first. But at the moment, there's no guarantee that US or European regulators will allow 'Search Plus Your World' to continue, as long as it appears to be excluding Google's main competitors.