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INTERNET CONNECTION

An Early Introduction to the Google+ Social Networking Project

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Reviewing a brand new web-based service is always a risky proposition, as it seems many of them fail to catch on beyond the initial excitement of the announcement of a release. Google Wave, the subject of an April 2010 column in this journal (Ovadia 2010, 158) was abandoned by Google just a few months later (Miller 2010, B5). With that caveat in mind, it can be noted that summer 2011 saw Google announce and release Google+, Google's most recent attempt to enter the social networking space.

Google's first foray into social networking was Orkut, which launched in 2004 and, for reasons no one quite seems to understand, quickly came to be wildly popular only in Brazil (Kugel 2006, C1). Google's next attempt was Buzz, which many users found intrusive, since the service pulled data from a user's Gmail contacts without the user's consent. The Buzz experiment resulted in Federal Trade Commission complaints, with Google eventually agreeing to an independent audit every 2 years for the next 20 years and promising to obtain permission from users before sharing their information (Gruenwald 2011, 5). Google's struggles with social networking projects might be related to Pariser's observation that while Facebook is good at managing relationships among people, Google is good at managing relationships among pieces of information (Pariser 2011, 40).

Still, these failures seem to have helped Google in developing Google+, in terms of showing Google which pitfalls to avoid this time around. While it seems early to speak to its popularity in Brazil, Google+ seems very mindful of users' privacy. It is a fairly standard social networking site, where one adds friends and sees a stream of their news and posts. Where Google+ is different is with what Google+ refers to as circles. Circles are ways to arrange your contacts within Google+. Once someone is in a user's circle,

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that person can easily be allowed to see certain content, or be restricted from seeing it. Moving people into a circle involves dragging and dropping a name into an on-screen circle.

For instance, the default circles, which can be changed and renamed, are Friends, Family, Acquaintances, and Following. Users can also create additional circles. Information posted can be made public, available to only one or any combination of your specific circles. Users can also take advantage of what Google calls extended circles, meaning information is visible not just to anyone in your personal circles, but also to your friends' circles. But content can also be limited to a single individual.

The result is simple-yet-granular control over just about every aspect of your social network. It's very simple to control who is seeing what, and it is just as easy to see who has access, since every piece of Google+ content also indicates the access level.

Of course, it is hard to control content in a social network. A user might want a particular post to be private, but if someone decides to share it, the private post can suddenly become very visible. To a certain extent, this type of thing is impossible to control. But Google+ does take some steps to prevent it. When sharing a piece of content that is not public, Google+ reminds the user to consider that the content was not created to be publicly visible. Additionally, users can configure a piece of content to not be reshareable, preventing others from resharing content via the Google+ share button. Obviously, content can still be copy-and-pasted and reposted, but in this particular instance Google+ does make a valiant effort to do what it can to protect user privacy. In fact, one of the big differences between Google+ and Facebook is Google's granular privacy control. Where Facebook privacy settings often feel like a moving and elusive target, Google+ puts privacy front and center in a surprisingly humane and easy-to-understand way.

Which is not to say that Google+ is a privacy panacea. The service is still very new and users are still determining what Google is and is not doing with user data. Some have speculated Google might use user data to create targeted advertising (Learmonth, 2011). One would assume Google is treading very carefully, though, as Facebook faced very loud and very public outcry for its Beacon advertising program, eventually shutting the targeted advertising service down under the weight of a class-action lawsuit (Carr 2009, 44). One might also speculate Google will proceed carefully with Google+, as the service was released days after confirming receipt of a Federal Trade Commission subpoena investigating Google's business practices (Catan 2011, B1).

In recent months, Facebook has tried to be more sensitive to user privacy and data concerns. In October 2010, the company announced new privacy settings that were designed to be easier for users to manage (Zuckerberg, 2010). The company also announced a way for users to export their data out of Facebook (Paczkowski, 2010).

Right around that same time, Google engineers published an article about their efforts to allow users to export data out of Google applications, solving the problems of users being trapped in a service because that is where their important data lives:

Google is addressing this problem through its Data Liberation Front, an engineering team whose goal is to make it easier to move data in and out of Google products. The data liberation effort focuses specifically on data that could hinder users from switching to another service or competing product—that is data that users create in or import into Google products. This is all data stored intentionally via a direct action—such as photos, email, documents, or ad campaigns—that users would most likely need a copy of if they wanted to take their business elsewhere. (Fitzpatrick and Lueck 2010, 44)

The project, as it stands so far, is usable via www.google.com/takeout. As of this writing, users can export archives of their data from the aforementioned Buzz, which retains a presence in Google+, contacts and circles, Picasa web albums (Google's photo hosting service), Profile, and Stream. All five are components of Google+.

Google+ has some other components not yet seen in Facebook. One is Hangouts, a group video chat feature (Facebook recently launched its own video chat functionality, but, as of this writing, it does not support group video chat). Another feature is Sparks, which seems to try to link users to content, based on keywords the user identifies: "The signals that Google looks for in determining Sparks content is freshness, a visual component—videos will rank highly—and the degree to which the content is virally spreading on the net. (Tellingly, the Google News group has moved into the [Google+] division.) In other words, Sparks tries to deliver the kinds of thing you want to share with others, and Google hopes that its users do just that" (Levy 2011).

But will users leave Facebook for Google+? Or will they maintain presences in both spaces? It's impossible to say right now, but it is interesting to note that social networking usage is increasing among users over age 50 years (Madden 2010, 2). Those same older users are increasing their adoption of social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn at a higher rate than users 18–29 years old (Madden 2010, 2). The adoption rate could be higher because younger people are already using these sites, so it's more difficult for them to increase their rate. But as the demographics of these social networking sites change, will that drive younger users to new services? And is Google+ that service? Or will older users who aren't already heavily invested in Facebook move to the newer Google+? Or will most people choose to stay with Facebook?

A compelling aspect to the emergence of Google+ will be seeing who, if anyone, winds up using the service. Researcher Danah Boyd found class

differences between teen MySpace and Facebook users, specifically studying the years 2006 and 2007 (Boyd 2009, 1). She notes the significance of the dates in terms of when Facebook became open to all users (in September 2006) and not just available to those affiliated with an academic institution (Boyd 2009, 9). Will researchers see the same kind of class shift if Google+ catches on?

There's no way to accurately predict what will happen with Google+, but it's a very interesting space to watch. The privacy issues Google+ both creates and solves are fascinating for librarians. The fact that Google+ and Facebook are both developing ways for users to export their data is a positive step in terms of giving users full control of their data and keeping it free of proprietary systems. But data is not the only component to social networks. As Dan Gillmor (2011) points out, some aspects of social networking are not transportable: "At least you can download what you've posted on Google+ if you quit the service, via its data liberation feature, though what you can't take with you—the relationships and conversations—is at least as valuable if not more so." Will these relationships and conversations ever become portable? Is there a data format that will one day allow users to seamlessly move between competing networks without losing their social networking history?

Finally, another interesting challenge to Google+ is doing research on it. Some subscription databases, like EBSCOHost, ignore the plus sign at the end of words. The ProQuest legacy platform does not accept a + sign as part of a keyword. All of this makes searching for articles about Google+, or GooglePlus, a bit more challenging than one might expect. One should build extra time into Google+ searches since there might be a need to review the syntax documentation of certain databases in order for the search to be effectively executed.

Google+ is still new, and while it seems an intriguing space, given Google's track record with social networking and given the dominance of Facebook, there's absolutely no reason to expect Google+ to topple Facebook. But because Google+ is doing some interesting things with social networking, and because so many people are watching these features, even if Google+ does not catch on, it's still an important experiment to monitor. One can already see how certain Google+ features are triggering Facebook changes. As Google+ evolves (it seems to be changing very quickly, as it is recently out of field trial mode as of this writing), so might Facebook, which makes Google+ something to keep an eye on. At least for the moment.

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