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A Comparison of Google + and Facebook

Throughout history, humans have sought to gain new ways of communicating with each other, meeting new people, and organizing themselves. For thousands of years, people used technologies ranging from smoke signals and couriers on horse all the way to the telegraph and phone. Then, in 1975, ARPANET became fully operational. This new network allowed any computer to transfer packets of data to any other computer and very importantly switch which computer it was communicating to. The power of this new connectivity was realized before the network was even completed and e-mail began to come into being allowing users to instantaneously communicate with each other. Then, at the beginning of the 21st century, Friendster was created and the concept of the social network came into its own. A small startup called MySpace then took the concept of Friendster and improved on it, allowing millions of users to communicate in new ways. Then, in 2004, the current ruler of social networking went online and Facebook began its rise to internet dominance. Now there is a new player in the world of social networking. Its name is Google + and some think, as shown in a satirical cartoon by Beatriz Torres, that it will do to Facebook what Facebook did to MySpace, which, as the cartoon cleverly displays has, devalued from being worth \$585 million, shortly after Facebook started growing, to now being worth around \$35 million. So far Google + has been able to show incredible growth and was, as the cartoon shows, for at least a period considered to be the new cool kid on the block. It, however, remains to be seen if Google + will end up supplementing

Facebook, replacing Facebook, or just dying off as so many other attempts at social networking have done.

The primary argument against Facebook and for Google + has to do with the privacy features available on the two services. As Google's Vice-president of management, Bradley Horowitz, says: "[i]n the online world, there's this 'share box,' and you type into it and you have no idea who is going to get that, or where it's going to land, or how it's going to embarrass you six months from now. For us, privacy isn't buried six panels deep" (Beer). Mr. Horowitz is referring to the primary difference between Facebook and Google +, which is in the way information is shared with others. There are complex ways to change who sees what is posted on Facebook, but it is tedious and not available for all features. On the other hand, on Google +, the "circles" feature allows for sharing with only specific people and viewing other people's activity based on groups. These groups are created by the user as friends are added. This allows a user to completely compartmentalize their relationships with friends, associates, family, coworkers, etc., making it possible to share with one group items which a user would not want another group to see. This is a much more natural way of communicating, and this system may help Google to take a portion of Facebook's market share.

There are, however, some serious failing points for Google +, and these have to do with the circle feature which is also what makes Google + so promising. The first is the difficulty of organizing the circles. Whereas on Facebook it is very easy to add new friends, as Kevin Cheng, the product manager on Twitter's redesign, points out, in addition to being tedious to create circles it is also often difficult to think through the concept. He gives a number of situations where it is difficult to determine the group into which a person falls. For example, a coworker who attends the same school as the user or a friend who the user met through school friends but

who does not go to the same school as the user. He also goes on to discuss the difficulty in maintaining circles as time passes. He points out that people move from circle to circle and being able to remember who is in which circle and where they should be moved is beyond the amount of effort which most people would likely be willing to put into the system.

Another possible boost for Google + exists in the form of possible support from advertisers. There is a goal amongst Google + producers to make a product that is more open to the outside internet, as opposed to Facebook which is often considered a “walled garden” by analysts as it is completely self-contained allowing minimal interaction with other areas of the internet. As it stands now, Google is the dominant force in advertising across virtually the entire internet with the exception of inside of Facebook’s “walled garden”. There is no reason to believe that Facebook will extend its advertising power beyond itself into the wider web, but if Google + were to edge out Facebook for a share of the social network market, then Google advertising users would be able to seamlessly integrate their advertising through the internet and into the realm of social media without switching providers. This gives Google + possible support from advertisers, independent of general user experience (Beer).

Another weakness of Google + has to do with its general network structure. Within Facebook, the network is an organically-formed, scale-free network. This means that the network can grow in any direction at any rate based on the needs of the individual nodes (users). This yields to a network type which responds very well to the connections which a user creates without really thinking. A user creates bonds with their friends, family, coworkers, etc., which create a network where many nodes are connected to many other nodes. This facilitates rapid growth of the network and causes the user to see information from people whom they know, with the ability to pass that information onto the other people they know. This also allows the user to

meet people who are connected past a nearby node, who will generally be in some way related to the user or share a similar interest. On the other hand Google +’s circles create a network for each circle which are very much unconnected and which do not grow organically, but rather as a result of the way in which the user sets them up. This prevents the rapid growth in size and complexity, which is seen within the Facebook network. This also prevents the kind of discovery of new people which is seen in the Facebook network, as connectivity is limited to the people within a user’s circle. And finally, there is a problem with managing the size of the circles: if a circle is too large, then it ignores many of the benefits of broadcasting to a small group without gaining the benefits of a network designed like Facebook’s, alternatively, if a circle is too small, then it loses the benefits of being a social network and becomes no different than one to one communication such as e-mail and texting. Maintaining the proper size is a process that could be very labor intensive and not worth it for many potential users (Mayande).

The natures of Facebook and Google +, their individual strengths and weaknesses, along with the market in which they currently exist, make it very difficult to predict which service will eventually be dominant and what that service will look like when it gets there. The one service that is well established, but has privacy and control issues, and the service that has a huge, well-known, and liked multinational backing it, but has designed in growth difficulty and ease of use problems.

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