

An Introduction to Google Plus

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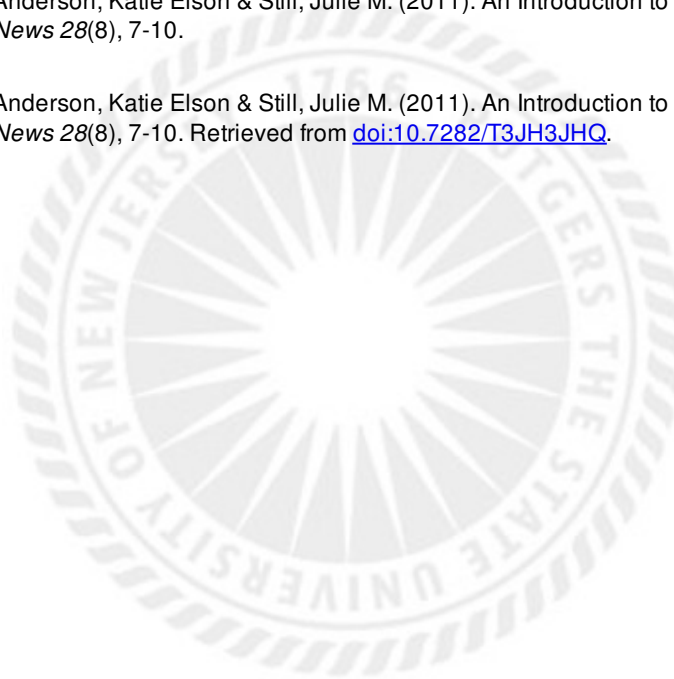
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Citation for this version and the definitive version are shown below.

Citation to Publisher Anderson, Katie Elson & Still, Julie M. (2011). An Introduction to Google Plus. *Library Hi Tech News* 28(8), 7-10.
Version: *News* 28(8), 7-10.

Citation to *this* Version: Anderson, Katie Elson & Still, Julie M. (2011). An Introduction to Google Plus. *Library Hi Tech News* 28(8), 7-10. Retrieved from [doi:10.7282/T3JH3JHQ](https://doi.org/10.7282/T3JH3JHQ).



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An Introduction to Google+

Google officially introduced the Google+ project on their blog on June 28, 2011. A select number of users received invitations for the field trial and those users were given the opportunity to invite other users. Shortly after the release, Google put a halt to the invites, leaving those with invites even unable to login. While potential users anxiously awaited for this new social network to be reopened, those lucky enough to get a look happily shared information and opinions regarding Google's new foray into social networking. With the buzz surrounding the release of this project, many people were able to see and read about the network before they even logged in for the first time, creating even more hype. Google+ is now open to the public. Anyone can sign up for it at www.google.com/+.

The reasoning for the initial exclusivity is that the product is still in a beta stage. Google is reacting quite quickly to the feedback of the early adopters as the product continues to change on a regular basis. The day the project was opened to the public, several modifications and enhancements were also announced. The initial growth via invites has been notable with comScore.com reporting 20 million users in the first 21 days. Initially requiring invites, Google+ can now be joined by anyone, although users are required to have or set up a Google account. A Google account is any account used to sign in to a Google product such as Gmail, Blogger or YouTube. Creation of an account in a Google product creates a Google profile, which is necessary in order to join Google+. At present the profile information does not appear to transfer from one Google product to another. For example information on a Blogger profile is not automatically transferred to the Google+ profile and vice versa.

Google's previous attempts at social networking resulted in a lot of hype and a giant fizzle for Google Wave and a backlash against privacy issues with Google Buzz. The Google+ project seeks to provide the potential that Google Wave held with collaboration and integration

with Google Docs and other Google services as well as address the privacy issues that plagued Google Buzz and continue to be controversial issues with Facebook and other social networking sites. As with all social networking sites, the Google+ project strives to provide users with Streamlined ways to communicate, collaborate, create, and share. The advantage that Google+ has over other social networking sites is that it the shares, communicates with and enhances already popular Google services such as Google Chrome, Google Reader, Google Calendar, Google Documents, and Picasa. When a user is logged into these Google services on a desktop, a black toolbar (Fig.1) now appears along the top of the screen. This toolbar provides quick access to these services as well as an easy way to get to Google+.

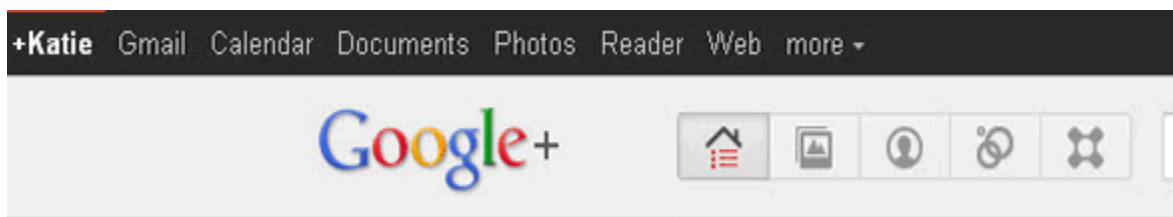


Figure. 1: Toolbar and Google+ Icons

The Google+ elements are:

Profile

Like most social media products, Google+ allows those in the community to create a profile introducing themselves and giving a little (or a lot) of personal information. Profile fields include the standard fields such as employment, places lived, relationship status, education, and contact information, but also allows for a free form introduction and “bragging rights.” Google, somewhat controversially, does not allow people to set up accounts under pseudonyms or nicknames, but does have “nicknames” and “other names” fields in the profile. Profile owners can decide if their profile should be visible or searchable. The profile page provides easy access

to one's photos, videos and items that have been +1'd (recommended by the user by clicking on the +1 button on a website or in a browser).

Circles

The premiere portion of Google+ or "what everyone is talking about" are the Circles, which allow for more privacy when posting. While Facebook will allow people to put their "friends" into categories, Google+ allows for a more complete separation or segmentation. Users put their contacts into "circles" by user-created category ("friends," "family," "history department," "library board," "ALA committee" and so on). The names given to circles are not publically available but naming a circle "people I don't like" may not be advisable. Adding people to circles is a unilateral action; permission of the other person is not required. Google+ users get a message when they have been added to a circle. They can reciprocate by adding that person to their circles, or not.

▼ Drag people to your circles to follow and share



Figure. 2: Circles

Posts can be sent to individual circles or more than one at once. At present posts cannot be sent to anyone who is not in the sender's circles. Likewise, information can be posted to individual circles, groups of circles, or everyone. This avoids the information overload from people who post frequently or about topics that are of limited interest. Users can also be blocked.

Librarians can create niche brands by assembling circles for various aspects of their professional life. Someone who acts as liaison to an academic history department, as a resource to a local or regional historical society, and as webmaster for a professional association devoted to a particular time period can create circles for each of those roles and send out information to all of them at once or only to one, depending on the relevance of the information at hand. This is very similar to the varied corporate advertising campaigns that are designed to appeal to different segments of the population. It's the same product, just viewed through a different lens. A librarian who manages the library's social media, Facebook, Twitter, and Foursquare, can set up a circle on Google+ to talk with other librarians who do the same thing, or have a different circle for each and send to one, two or all three at once. Librarians with various subject interests can also create circles for each of those interests and review postings at varying times to update their knowledge when needed.

Stream

The first item in the Stream is a blank field that prompts the user to "share what's new" with the option to add a photo, video, link or location. Posts in this field will appear in the Stream of those who have circled the user. Likewise, posts from the individuals in a user's circle appear in the user's Stream. All posts in the Stream can be viewed at once, or the Stream can be filtered by each circle. A user can comment on these posts, share the posts or show their interest in these posts by "+1"ing the item. There is also an "incoming" Stream which contains the posts from those individuals who are not in a user's circle (they have placed the user in the circle, but the user has not reciprocated). The posts in a Stream appear because someone has specifically chosen to share with that user. This information is available on the first line of the Stream in the sharing details. A post will appear as Public (everyone on the web), Limited (only shared with

specific circles) or Extended circles (specific circles and those users' circles). When attempting to share a post that is showing as Limited or Extended Circles, the user receives this message "This post was originally shared with a limited audience – remember to be thoughtful about who you share it with." and must click OK before the item can be shared. This is an added step for users to remain aware of privacy issues.

Photos

Photos from a user's circles and a user's own photos appear in the Stream when they are posted and will also appear in the Photos section of Google+. Picasa albums appear in this area as well. The integration with Picasa also allows a user to view the Picasa albums of people in their circles (only if they are public albums or the user has been given access via Picasa). Users can share their Picasa albums with their circles and also upload new photos to the albums. Picasa is being renamed, likely to Google Photos as Google rebrands and Streamlines products with the introduction of Google+. This integration with the photo product, whatever it is called, creates an almost effortless way to upload and manage photos.

Hangouts

Hangouts are video chat sessions that are easily initiated by a user and joined by people in their circles. Anyone with a webcam can begin or join a hangout. Notification that a hangout has begun appears in the Stream and anyone can join. More people can be invited to join a hangout that is in session. While in a Hangout session, users can chat and pull up videos from YouTube to jointly view and comment on. One advantage of hangouts over other video chatting software is that they are more spontaneous because there is no need to dial a user directly or specify times and places. If people in a user's circle are online at the time, they simply join the hangout. With the added features of being able to record Hangouts and view YouTube videos

during the video session, there is great potential for Hangouts for meetings, instruction and professional communication. Hangouts with extras enables a new set of features for Hangouts, including named Hangouts, note-sharing, screen sharing, and Google Docs collaboration.

Games

Google announced the addition of games to Google+ on August 11, 2011. The games component allows a user to share the fun of social gaming with the people in their circles. The existence of games is a nod to Facebook's popular gaming element and seen by some as a step towards attracting to a more mainStream audience.

Sparks

Of all the Google+ elements, Sparks was the least discussed in the opening days. Sparks was initially released as a major part of the Google+ experience, appearing on the main Stream page. The intention was to help a user "find what they are interested in" by providing suggestions and an open search. Clicking on these suggested interests, or entering a different interest results in current stories and related content on this topic. One of the major changes announced with Google+ opened to the public was the incorporation of Sparks into an overall search function. Search was opened to include everything and instead of appearing as a separate service, Sparks now appears alongside results for people and posts. These all inclusive searches can be saved and pinned to the main Stream page. It is easy to share and +1 Sparks, with these options appearing on the snippet. The enhanced search functionality has placed Sparks in a less premiere place, but it remains a good way to find current information on a topic and share it with Circles, without ever having to leave Google+.

Mobile

The day Google+ was released the Android app was available in the Marketplace. As a Google product, it is not surprising that Google+ is integrated with Android Smartphones. Apple users had to wait a few days for a Google+ app for their iPhones and iPod touches. Currently iPad users have to settle for using the iPhone app or the mobile site.

Using Google+ on a mobile device allows a user to add a “Nearby” Stream, which shows any public posts in the area of the mobile device (when location settings are enabled). This can be useful for locating other Google+ users in the area and see what people are talking about near you. This could be particularly useful at conferences in order to connect with others or see where to get the best lunch.

The mobile site and the mobile app provide user friendly access to the Stream, Photos, Circles, Profile, Hangouts, and Notifications. The mobile app provides the ability to instantaneously upload photos and video from a phone. The mobile app also has an icon for “Messenger”, which does not appear on the mobile or desktop versions of Google+.

Messenger

Messenger is a platform for text conversations between multiple parties. While the icon for Messenger only appears on the Mobile app, it is possible to Messenger from a desktop or laptop (must be invited by email which is allowed through settings). A user initiates a Messenger by inviting their circles or specific members of their circles. The invitees receive notification that they have been invited to the Messenger and can join the conversation. Everyone who joins the Messenger will see all the messages from everyone else. It is interesting to note that any member of the Messenger can rename the Messenger while it is taking place. While in a Messenger, a user can chose to leave the Messenger at any time. Everyone in the Messenger is notified of the departure. Settings allow a user to determine who can and can't invite them to a Messenger

allowing Anyone, Extended Circles or Circles to invite them to Messenger. As essentially a group messaging service, Messenger's potential ranges from planning a lunch to conducting a virtual meeting or even providing virtual reference assistance on the go with a group or class.

Librarians and Google+

Within the first month of the release of Google+ it was evident that librarians were taking a look at this new product as blog posts, tweets and Facebook posts contained thoughts and opinions on the product. A public post by +Debbie Ohi provides a way for librarians to find each other by encouraging other librarians to put their name in the comments and share the link with their professional circles. As of this writing this post has been shared 115 times and has over 250 librarians listed. This number however is quite small compared to the list from <http://www.findpeopleonplus.com> that was recently shared by +Ryan Shultz which now shows 3,846 Google+ users who identify as librarians (www.findpeopleonplus.com/Occupation-Librarian). This list is an excellent starting point to identify other librarians to add to circles.

As with any social media product, the potential for Google+ is dependent on the user community to keep it vibrant, relevant, and current. Google needs to make sure the platform is secure and provide for privacy and easy interaction. Some of the frustrations with Facebook are the irrelevant and mundane posts that people can feel overwhelmed by (for example Farmville and the minutia of everyday life that some feel obligated to share). Google+'s use of circles and Streams allows the users to only read the information they are most interested in and to save the rest for later or not at all. The ability to communicate with groups of people at a time has great possibilities for professional associations and informal groups. That librarians appear to be early adopters is an encouraging sign, not only for Google's design, but for librarianship as an occupation to cultivate the larger social media world.

Learn More

Google provides details on the Google+ project on their support pages:

<http://www.google.com/support+/hl=en>. These pages contain helpful videos, descriptions and examples on how to use Google+. There are also several websites such as

<http://googleplusanswers.com> that provide descriptions, examples and tips. There are many Google+ users that provide tips, tools and assistance. Several Google employees post publicly with information and development news on this and other Google products. It is worth adding +Natalie Villalobos, the Community Manager for the Google+ project to a circle in order to receive regular updates and changes to the project. Another person to circle for valuable information on Google+ is Mashable's +Pete Cashmore. As mentioned earlier, there are many librarians on Google+ sharing their thoughts on its use within the library and within the profession. The best way to learn more about Google+ is to jump right in and start using it. We invite you to add us to a circle; +Katie Elson Anderson and +Julie Still.

The screenshot shows a Google+ profile page for a user named 'Katie'. The page layout includes a top navigation bar with links to Gmail, Calendar, Documents, Photos, Reader, and Web. The main content area is divided into three columns. On the left is a sidebar with navigation options: 'Welcome', 'Stream' (with sub-options for Friends, Family, NewsyTechy, Rutgers, Library Folks, and More), 'Sparks' (with sub-options for librarian, academic libraries, academic library, and libraries), and 'Chat'. The middle column displays the 'Rutgers' circle's stream, featuring a post by Julie Still about a study on voter turnout and a post by Katie Elson Anderson recommending the book 'The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement'. The right column shows the 'Rutgers (8)' circle header, an '+ Add to Rutgers' button, 'View all' link, 'Send invitations - 150 left' status, an 'Invite friends' button, and a 'Hangouts' section with a 'Start a hangout' button.

Figure 3.