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Google+ Stumbles Over Identity

by Jim Harper on August 1, 2011 · 11 Comments

I started to see hints of it last week, but I now believe Google+ is in full stumble-mode over user identity and naming. It looks as though they've taken common sense—everyone has one name—and woven it into their terms of service. You can't use a non-traditional name on Google+. But naming and identity are more complex than that.

In my book, *Identity Crisis*, I wrote that an identity is a collection of information other people and institutions have about a person. Others use identity information they have to distinguish you from other people (or to group you) in their minds or records. This makes identity a gating mechanism: you can allow people into a part of your life by making them privy to the relevant set of identifiers, or keep them out by denying them that information.

Commonly, people use varied identities to exclude others, for social or professional reasons, such as when they open a social network account in a false name to keep their parents or their students from accessing parts of social life that are not meant for them to see. Sometimes identity is varied for political reasons, such as when an account opens in a pseudonym for the purpose of avoiding reprisal. This is an area where Facebook's "real names" policy has stepped in it. The further one lives from conventional life in a given society, or the more contrarily to power, the more important it is to control identity.

Identity Woman—who tells her story at the first link above—uses her non-traditional identity in a non-traditional, but completely reasonable, way. It's just the name that identifies her better to the community she plans to reach on Google+. But Google+ thinks that the name she is supposed to use is the same one her parents gave her, is the same one on her tax return, is the same one on her college degree, is the same one on her driver's license.

Google+ has smartly replicated the real-world concept of social circles in its "circles" function. But they haven't replicated real-world practice in terms of naming and identity. Why? Among other reasons, because doing so would allow users to decide which "circle" Google itself is in. Google doesn't want that. Like Facebook wants to be your super-friend, Google wants to be your super-circle.

Google+ is seeing like a state, vastly simplifying the use of identity on its platform to serve its purposes. That will be a continuing discomfort and an impediment to its fullest success. But the fullest success of social networking will probably not be on an owned platform anyway.