"...let them do things that were previously impossible."

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BRADLEY HOROWITZ

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Project: People

Google Vice President of Product Bradley Horowitz offers his perspective on the launch of Google+ and the potential of the 'people web' to make our lives better.

When I first got involved in the internet in the mid-'90s, it was just a collection of web pages created from scratch with online consumption in mind. Then, with the rise of what was called 'web 2.0,' it expanded to include all sorts of media that was previously the exclusive realm of the offline world: videos, pictures, live performances, news, and more. And in the past five years we've begun yet another phase in the evolution of the internet, something we can loosely call the 'people web.' This period has been marked by the rise of Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, standing on the shoulders of earlier successes such as MySpace and Friendster.

At Google, people-related searches have always been one of our most popular categories, and we work hard to understand that when someone types or speaks 'John Smith' into the Google search box, it's a person they're searching for and not just a string of characters. We're getting pretty good at it, but the advent of the people web gives us a chance to do much, much more. This isn't true just for Google. The rise of social networks, and the rich set of information they contain about people, their connections, and their preferences (what we call the 'social graph'), has the potential to make the entire web better. ➡

The internet is already pretty awesome, but it's also created a whole bunch of problems that we never had before. Focus, for one. Social networks are great when you only have a few dozen friends, but when that number is a few hundred, your update stream becomes a torrent.

Sharing is another. There are dozens of ways to share things online; so many that it's become a very confusing experience. My work friends are different from my school friends. When I walk into a bar, it's different from when I walk into a church. There's a nuance to relationships that's hard to capture online.

And privacy is obviously important. When people are putting their entire lives online, they should be fully aware of who can see what, and they have to remain in full control.

In my job, we often ask ourselves, 'What should the internet be doing for people that it's not doing today?' It should be improving people's lives by leaps and bounds, helping them spend more time on what's important, helping them establish deeper, more meaningful connections. Eric Schmidt likes to say that with the internet you should never be bored, because you can always find your friends online, make new friends, and see what's most interesting to you right now. The people web presents us with a great opportunity not only to give people their lives back, but also to let them do things that were previously impossible.

The Google+ project, which we launched in June, is the beginning of our effort to put people at the center of all Google products. This is essential to our mission: Information is inseparable from the people who create it, react to it, and pass it along. Or, to put it in the context of my earlier example, if you actually know John Smith, then when you do a search for him we may return very different results for you than for someone who doesn't know him – like photos from his recent vacation. The same goes for ads, email, YouTube, and our other services: Understanding people and the social graph can make all of them better.

With Google+, we're starting to chip away at some of the big problems that the web has created. Circles bring real-life nuance to online sharing, and give you granular control over the updates you see in your Stream. Hangouts are a whole new way to casually meet up with friends – it's like *Cheers* for the web. Sparks pulls interesting content from around the web about stuff you care about. The Mobile app makes it brain-dead easy to share what's around you right now (and makes sure that pictures aren't locked in your phone forever). ➡

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Quantify: People

Within three weeks of Google+ launching to the public, over 120 people had used Google Docs to create a collaborative manual that was available in English, German, Russian, and Chinese.[2]

We're doing all this while paying close attention to people's privacy. This is a big challenge, not just for Google but for practically any internet company today. People need to have complete control over what's private and what's public, and they need more ways to let us know how we're doing in this regard. When we first launched Google+, our users let us know that it was pretty easy to re-share stuff that was only supposed to go to a particular Circle. So we quickly put in a feature to warn people about that and let them disable re-sharing.

What's great is that we're using Google+ to get feedback like this all the time. Over 65,000 people have me in their Circles, and as my profile is open for comments, I get to hear new ideas from them all the time. This creates real intimacy between me and my users, and it helps them to see that Google isn't a nameless facade, but real people trying to make great products. Sometimes I start Hangouts so we can interact directly with them. One night last week I talked, face-to-face, with people from Bulgaria, Singapore, and Vietnam, all from my living room in Palo Alto. Isn't that extraordinary?

Or maybe not. We're hearing all sorts of stories about people using Google+ to make new connections. Vic Gundotra, who leads our social efforts, told me a great anecdote. A few weeks ago he was checking out his Stream and saw a post from Chee Chew, an engineer in our Kirkland office. Chee wondered whether Hangouts could be useful for deaf people to chat online with sign language. 'That's interesting,' Vic thought, so he re-shared it. Soon, 200 other people had shared it, and by the next afternoon Chee was in touch with a computer scientist in the Midwest who was already working on tools to make it happen. That's cool.

There are more: A surgical consult between Kentucky and New York conducted via Hangouts; people in the military connecting with loved ones back home; concerts on Hangouts; a crowdsourced Google+ user guide translated into German, Chinese and Russian. I'm sure stories like this aren't limited to Google+, since our competitors are also helping people all over the world do great things on the people web. But hopefully we're pushing them with some of our innovations, and I'm sure they'll push back with some of their own.

And so our project continues. We have a richly competitive field, millions of people giving us great ideas and using our products in ways we never considered, and an environment that can make people's lives better all around the world. There's so much to do, and so few hours in the day. I think I'm going to go Hangout for a while. Care to join me?