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Professional Resource:

The Potential of Google+ as a Media Literacy Tool

James N. Cohen

Journalism, Media Studies and Public Relations Department, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, USA

Civic engagement is rarely the initial intent of a social media user. According to a 2011 Pew Internet Life study, nearly two-thirds of social media users are online to keep in touch with friends and family while only a very small percentage (near 5%) utilize it for learning.¹ The results of these studies have inspired media literacy scholars and educators to empower social media users to approach the online tools with a mind toward information sharing. The potential in social media is limitless, but many users have to be made aware of the possibilities. Educators in particular should be informed of the civic functions Google+ offers the user.

Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Google+ has an obvious advantage: a social network that is part of the largest search system available. Google+ integrates with the search engine, Google Maps, and utilizes mobile applications. With the access to the most amount of information on the web means that there are possibilities of using Google+ for civic engagement and media literacy as well as typical social media activity. Utilizing Google+ as a media literacy tool means understanding its use as an access point to analyze messages to engage critical thinking about everyday issue people face.² Google+ combines the elements of long-form posts, following others, reposting, video and images sharing in one social network. The following is a discussion of how to utilize the features available on Google+ to benefit media literacy.

Using Google+ is fairly simple to use if the user is familiar with Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, as the site combines all three. The first step is creating a user profile. It is important to create the Google+ profile responsibly as Google will favor your profile in a search for your name.

Google+ feeds are based on a grouping system called "Circles" where the user must curate other users into subjective categories. Google+ will suggest you start creating Circles from your Gmail address book and later you can create and label as many circles as you would like. Once you add someone to a circle, that person is notified they've been added, but never informed the name of the circle they have been added to. An example of a good circle would be to curate a handful of users who happen to all be attending the same event, whether political, educational, or otherwise.



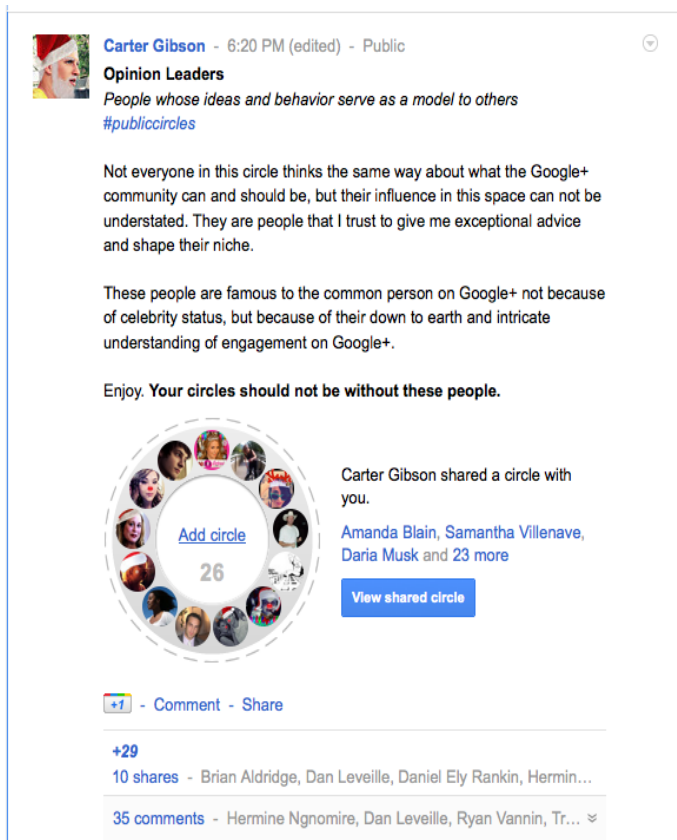
One of the first civic uses of Google+ is ability to curate a circle of users and share the circle with others. The intention to share the circle is to create a lasting social media connection to a set of users. Unlike a Twitter search, which just displays the feed based on the keyword and filters out non-associated tweets, the circle will remain after the event or topic and the user can see what the members of circle post after the event. Exposure to these new users may increase media literacy by the potential of viewing content outside a habitual content echo chamber.

Once you have organized your users into Circles, sharing information benefits those participating. The Google+ post is an elegant combination of the other social networks post. Google+ features the ability to add several links, write as much text as necessary, include "hashtags" (which activate a twitter-like subject search of Google+ user posts), mention users' names (by adding a "+" and typing a name), and use text

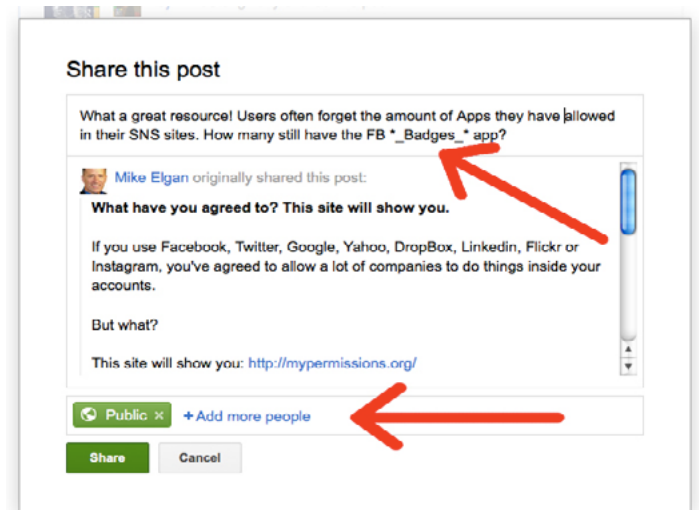
¹ <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Why-Americans-Use-Social-Media.aspx>

² Hobbs, Renee. *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*. Washington, D.C., The Aspen Institute, 2010, vii.

formatting. Offering this much customization to a post allows the post author to focus on the message he is writing and the author has the potential to add a certain weight to post. [For text formatting examples, go to <http://blazomania.com/2011/07/10/google-plus-text-formatting-tips-and-shortkeys/>]

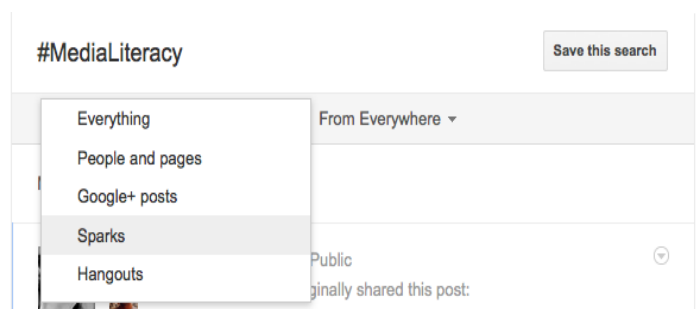


When sharing content, just as in the other Social Media sites, a commentary should be added. Being thorough and succinct in the post is beneficial to getting re-shared in someone else's profile. Google+ also offers the ability to choose who sees your post. You can make it public or restrict to just certain circles you'd like to share with. Keep in mind that the information that posted publicly can show up in Google searches as part of a "social feed."



(fig. 3 – note the text formatting (“*_” means bold and italics) and the ability to choose who sees the post.)

The “hashtag” feature is nothing new; any current event or concert includes its name with the # (pound) symbol in front of it. It's a metadata feature born in Twitter over four years ago and is now a major feature and part of the trending algorithm of Twitter. The Google+ search engine has features that empower the user within the constraint of the social network with the seamless advantage of Google search. For example, if you were to type #MediaLiteracy, Google+ creates a hyperlink to the search results. The results page defaults to an “Everything, From Everyone, From Everywhere” page that includes (and favors) Google+ posts, websites, and news known as “social search.” By clicking on the dropdown, you can focus the search to posts or web examples, called “Sparks.” Sparks are web results from multiple sources. Many Google+ users have replaced their Google Alerts with a Google+ Sparks saved search. During a natural disaster or live event such as a protest, Sparks can be the fastest way to retrieve relevant results to display.

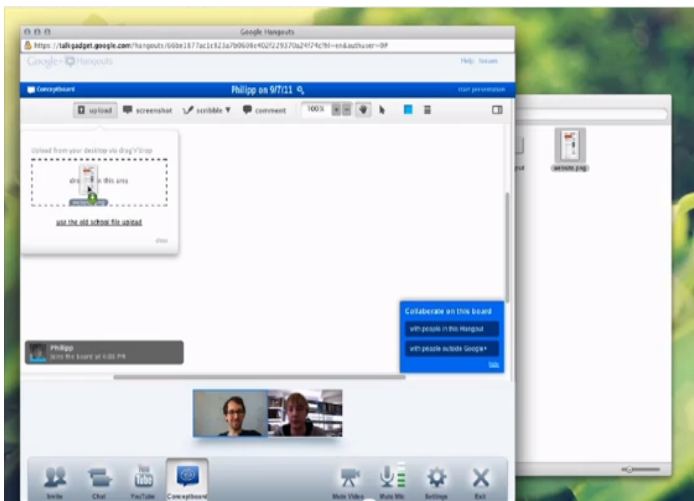


(fig. 4 – Choices of display for search results)

³ <http://gigaom.com/2010/04/30/the-short-and-illustrious-history-of-twitter-hashtags/>

Another feature of Google+ that is slowly becoming popular is the “Hangout.” Hangouts are video chat with up to ten people that can be saved to YouTube. The Hangout enhances the social network feel by bringing actual voice and picture of the other users. The most useful pragmatic function of the Hangout is the ability use screen share for your desktop or to display YouTube videos to all the participants. Some professors have actually held virtual office hours on Google+.⁴ Hangouts are now available as a mobile application on Android devices as well.

As a media literacy application, Hangouts offer the ability for users to discuss content in a small group setting. As a potential project, students can be assigned to analyze and evaluate media messages. For example, a user can show a commercial from YouTube to the group and hold a discussion about the rhetoric or alternate meanings embedded in the context. Furthermore, a news piece can be analyzed to see if the information is fair and balanced and the report tells a full story – all of which can be archived to YouTube and emailed to the instructor. Hangouts can occur within select circles or activated by clicking Hangout directly beneath a post. Once the Hangout opens, anyone who clicks Hangout will attend the virtual meeting as well. South Seattle Community College has used the feature to talk to guest speakers, create global discussions, and presentation collaboration with the desktop share feature.⁵



(fig. 5 – Google Plus Hangout featuring desktop share with a program called Concept Board (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJGp2_cXmRg))

⁴ <http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/professors-consider-classroom-uses-for-google-plus>

⁵ <http://sites.southseattle.edu/gplus/hangouts-1>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>

⁷ http://technolog.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/03/29/6369162-twiters-most-frequent-squawkers-a-loud-minority

⁸ <http://mashable.com/2012/01/03/google-growth-2012/>

⁹ <http://www.economist.com/node/21542677>

Social media growth in the last few years has expanded immensely; Facebook reports that there are 800 million active users – that means over 1 in 10 people on Earth have a Facebook account.⁶ Twitter, the second largest social network, shows 175 million accounts, but a study has shown that only about half that are active accounts and only 20,000 or so are considered “elite users” who produce the most information.⁷ Google+, launched late June 2011, is the third-place social media site and boasts over 60 million users, most of which return to the site quite often.⁸

Although part of a enormous company that is often the target of anti-trust authorities, Google+ is still a fledgling social network. Many of the early adopters of the Google+ migrated over in frustration at Facebook’s constant changes as it tiptoes the line of user privacy. The most recent Facebook change is the live ticker on the far right of the screen that displays user comments and activity in real time. In comparison, privacy controls in Google+ are very easy to understand and maintain. However, Google+ is criticized as well: Google searches now result in “personal results” as well as web results.⁹ The personal results are search returns based on previous searches in your Google+. Google feels that the “Search, + Social” results increase your likelihood of finding a result relevant to you because your peers may have already made the search previously and/or shared the result. As of March 1st, Google plans a further sharing upgrade that utilizes a your Google ID as a shared experience across multiple machines, something very similar to Apple’s iCloud. As mentioned previously, this is why it is important to carefully construct a Google+ post.

Concerns aside, Google+ is a global platform that has so far remained advertising free and less polarized. The commitment to user control has seemed to encourage civic engagement. The users who post the most fulfilling commentary to a post happen to get re-shared quite often. Some find it a very large compliment to become part of a sharable circle of “Opinion shapers” or “New Media Professionals.”

While I have found that students are somewhat reluctant to try a new social network even if they are

unhappy with the changes in Facebook or the limits of Twitter, many have joined to participate in the new activity. I have encouraged students to join Google+ and create posts that generate buzz and a following. While I also use Facebook Groups to cultivate ideas and merge play environments with learning environment, I find that Google+ allows for a public discourse on ideas and opinions. Posting and sharing on the new platform attempts at a heavier responsibility to tune into information and consider how other users may respond. As students graduate into a workforce, they will be responsible for many ideas and projects if they want to succeed. Google + has so far excelled as a social media that allows for multiple points and a global discourse.