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Does the social graph really need rebuilding?

by Itamar Novick

Editors' note: This is a guest column. See Itamar Novick's bio below.

The social-networking war between Google and Facebook is officially on with the [introduction of Google+](#) this past week. How ironic that it happened on the same week that Facebook's old nemesis, [MySpace, was sold at a fire sale price to an advertising company](#).

The battle is already filled with intrigue, as we hear about [Google+ invite scams](#), a [competing Circle Hack alternative](#), and how [Mark Zuckerberg has the most followers](#) on Google+ so far.

For a social-media fanboy like me, it's all fun to watch. But I believe that the success of Google+ will come down to one fundamental question: do people really want to segment their connections, or have we moved into an era where we all live in one big, blurry circle, anyway?

The line between professional and personal networks is already very thin.

Google+ has a clean interface, as well as a slew of social and communication features that are more evolved or not found in Facebook, including [Huddle, Hangout, and Sparks](#). [But it's clear that the main differentiation Google is banking on is Circles](#).

[Circles allows users to organize](#) their friends, family, co-workers, business contacts, classmates, near strangers, etc., into groups and share specific information with them. Google's [Vic Gundotra](#) and [Bradley Horowitz](#) are starting with the premise that the current state of social networks is broken, awkward, and in need of more targeting; Google+ is the fix.

Not sure it's broken

Facebook, with more than 750 million users, has done an amazing job of convincing the masses that privacy is dead, or at least not necessary. If privacy is dead, do we really need walls between our personal and professional connections anymore?

In speaking with several start-ups focused on professional social networks and Facebook data analytics, it seems that Facebook is increasingly becoming a professional communication channel.

Social network boundaries

How separate do you keep different facets of your life on social networks?

- Separate. I don't want coworkers knowing about my kids, my parents knowing about my friends, or my fans knowing about my dentist appointment.
- It's a blurry line. Work, school, and home are all parts of life, but I don't want to tell everybody everything.
- None. I'm one individual, not a split personality--if you don't like the package, don't follow me.

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One start-up, [FellowUp](#), a personal productivity tool that taps into social accounts, reports that its users (mostly professionals) use Facebook to connect with both their work and personal contacts 50 percent more often than through LinkedIn.

As someone in his early 30s, I can tell you that the line between professional and personal networks is already very thin. I believe that many people in my generation group all our connections together.

We hear stories about people getting fired because their manager found inappropriate content on Facebook or about college students being reprimanded by their moms for their less than chivalrous acts with random girls. I think that those are rare instances. And hey, you live with what you post and whom you choose as online friends. People are used to living that way; do they really care about changing their behavior?

They will come, but for how long?

The launch of Google+ can already be judged a short-term success, if based on nothing more than Google's servers crashing from the overwhelming demand. Google's reach across different product lines will also ensure that Google+ has a steady stream of new users. Undoubtedly, if Google builds it, they will come. But how long will they stick around?

The attention span of users is limited. People use Facebook and Twitter because they provide two pretty different communication channels. Google+, however, is just too similar to Facebook, so it must either be a [Facebook killer](#) or die trying.

One competitive consideration is Google's position on the mobile front. Google has mobile DNA with [Android](#) and can build on top of it. What would happen if Google preloaded Google+ into all Android devices? Facebook probably needs to get more serious about mobile--and fast.

In the end, whether Google+ or Facebook wins will depend on a question of preference: do people want to live orderly online lives segmented into mini social graphs, or live with one big,

messy one? I, for one, am happy mixing my personal and business contacts, and I think that the line between the two is on its way to being erased for good.



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Itamar focuses on early-stage investments in the mobile and consumer-facing Web space for Morgenthaler Ventures. He is an MBA candidate at the Berkeley-Haas School of Business and a former product manager at social-optimization platform Gigya. Itamar also co-founded two start-ups, a real-estate billing software company and a lost & found online directory, as well as Israel's military police cybercrime investigation unit.