



Jan. 9, 2014

Mr. Larry Page, Chief Executive Officer  
Mr. Eric Schmidt, Chairman  
Google  
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway  
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Page and Mr. Schmidt,

I am writing to thank you for taking steps to clean up your social network, Google+, by shutting down the accounts of some apparent online predators and eliminating some explicit sexual content in apparent response to Consumer Watchdog's concerns expressed in mid-December. Clearly you can police your network when you want to do so. Consumer Watchdog calls on you to continue such necessary efforts. However, as explained below you have still failed to address a fundamental design flaw in Google+ that violates users' privacy and Consumer Watchdog urges you to remedy this situation immediately.

As you recall, Consumer Watchdog wrote you suggesting that in an apparent quest to grow the user base as rapidly as possible, Google+ had been allowed to become a virtual playground for online predators and explicit sexual content. With the December letter I enclosed a report compiled by a tech industry whistleblower, who had periodically monitored Google's social network since March.

The report listed and gave links to seven of the most egregiously salacious accounts including one user who described himself like this:

*"Nice daddy or older brother type who loves all things pervy... will share pics but not publicly—been deleted before! 38 now and looking to chat and share pics with any gay guys (or straight or bi) that are into it. **Any age is cool with me—who am I to tell you you're too young? Right?** Anyhow, I will share more photos as I go and will be on messenger as time allows! Hope to visit with you all soon!"*

This user's Circles also included over 100 boys. Many of the images were sexualized or nude images of children -- several who appeared to be under the age of 10 or even toddlers.

When I sent you our study, Google+ offered several Communities in which minors (or even adults posing as minors) could openly advertise the trading of sexually explicit images and photographs of each other – a blatant violation of Google's User Content & Conduct Policy. Google+ had several sexually explicit Communities specifically focused on minors and teens including "Horny Teens," "Horny Teen Chat," "Horny Teen Talk" and more. In many of these Communities sexually explicit content focused on teens was not only tolerated, but actively encouraged. The community guidelines for the Horny Teens Community for instance read:

*"About this community: Welcome to a community created for all the horny teens that*

*need someone else. **Explicit content may be present and is recommended and welcome here**, [emphasis added] please just enjoy yourselves and let me know if there is anything I can do to make your experience better. ;)*”

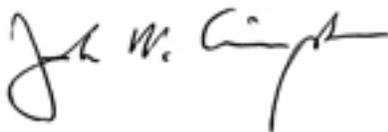
Thankfully these accounts have been deleted. Without a doubt you have the resources to continue to monitor the network and remove inappropriate material. When it was called to your attention, you did so. Now Google must understand that part of the responsibility of the operator of a social network is to proactively monitor its content. Consumer Watchdog calls on you to continue that necessary effort. However, doing that is not enough. You must address a fundamental design flaw in Google+ that compromises users’ privacy.

To understand the problem it is necessary to compare Google+ with other social networks such as Facebook. In Facebook for example, a person receiving a request from an individual to be their “friend” must approve that request first. If the person chooses not to accept, he or she is in no way associated with the individual.

On Google+ any individual can add a user to his Circles. If the user does not appreciate the posts he sends to them, they can block the individual. However, if anyone visits the person’s profile and he has opted to display publicly who is in his Circles, the user’s name and picture will still appear there. The user cannot remove himself from the sender’s Circles, no matter what, once that person has placed them in their Circles. A user is forced to be publicly associated with someone with whom they do not wish to be associated. For example, both of you are in my Circles and I rather suspect you’d prefer not to be. This is a fundamental privacy flaw and must be fixed. People must have the right to choose with whom they are associated.

Cleaning up Google+ was a necessary first step. Now you must to continue to monitor its content on an ongoing basis and you must allow users to determine with whom they are associated.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John M. Simpson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

John M. Simpson  
Privacy Project Director