



Dec. 17, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Page and Mr. Schmidt,

We are writing on behalf of Consumer Watchdog to call on you to take immediate action to police and clean up your social network, Google+, which in an apparent quest to grow the subscriber base as rapidly as possible has been allowed to become a virtual playground for online predators and explicit sexual content. Recent efforts to bolster Google+ include your decision to require that before a user can comment on a YouTube video they must have a Google+ account and allowing schools using Google Apps for Education to enable Google+ for students 13 and older. Turning a blind eye to the troubling privacy vulnerabilities on Google+ while encouraging greater use of the social network is simply unacceptable.

Writing last month in the British newspaper *The Daily Mail* Chairman Eric Schmidt outlined steps that Google is taking to fight child pornography on the Internet. The article described how Google "in the last three months put more than 200 people to work developing new, state-of-the-art technology to tackle the problem." Your effort to block Google Search from returning links to child sexual abuse material from appearing in your results is commendable. Shortly thereafter you cooperated in the arrest of a pedophile who was storing images on Picasa. However, there is a simple and more important step you must take if people are to believe you are genuinely concerned about combating this depravity. Turn your attention immediately to Google+ and bring order to a "Wild West" atmosphere that you are actively encouraging people to use.

"There is what I call the creepy line," Mr. Schmidt famously once said. "The Google policy on a lot of things is to get right up to the creepy line and not cross it." Sadly, Google+ has crossed far over the "creepy line."

Periodic monitoring of the service since last March through September by a tech industry whistleblower demonstrates that Google+ has become a virtual playground for online predators. Consumer Watchdog's own study confirmed many of the whistleblower's findings. We believe that in order to grow Google+'s user base as quickly as possible, you have put growth far ahead of the safety and security of its users. To assist you in solving the problem as soon as possible, we are including a copy of the whistleblower's study with this letter. Following are some of the highlights from that report.

A key part of the problem is the way Google+ makes suggestions of who a user should add to their "Circles." Google+ will often make suggestions that users add teens and even children to the Circles of adults, even when those adults' profiles, postings, community membership and Google+ search history include pornography, membership in sex-related communities, other age

inappropriate content, and even pedophile related content. In this sense, the Google+ Suggestions feature actually serves as a recruitment tool to pedophiles and sexual predators – suggesting that such predators add additional children to their Circles. Here’s an example:

In one test, the researcher searched Google+ exclusively for content related to teen pornography using a variety of keywords (“teens”, “sex”, “teen sex” “teen girls”, “teen boys”, “horny teens”, etc.), sex-related Google+ communities, and other Google+ users who were interested in such topics. Google+ suggested 108 users that the researcher should add to his Circle, many of whom were also interested in teen sex-related topics.

One person Google+ suggested to be added to the researcher’s Circle even described himself in his Google+ profile as follows:

*“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 Circle 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. While the research on this user was conducted months ago, his user profile and account were still active as of December 12th, 2013.

Another user’s profile whose image includes a photograph of a boy also includes over 50 boys in his Circle in sexually suggestive/exploitive poses and various states of undress. His Circle also includes a user whose profile image has been identified by the FBI as a universal symbol by which pedophiles identify each other.

The whistleblower’s monitoring found that Google+ is also apparently being used by suspected pedophiles to troll for underage users in order to engage them in sexually suggestive/sexually explicit online conversations, texts, and even videos. Example: A user from Florida includes 154 users in his Circle almost all of whom use photos of young boys as their profile photos. In a July 2013 Google+ entry, the user engages in correspondence with a 16-year-old “looking for love” and shares his age... 30 years old.

Google+ offers several Communities in which minors (or even adults posing as minors) can openly advertise the trading of sexually explicit images and photographs of each other – a blatant violation of Google’s User Content & Conduct Policy. Google+ has 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 is not only tolerated, but also encouraged. The community guidelines for the Horny Teens Community for instance reads as follows:

*“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. ;)”*

These Communities include hundreds, perhaps thousands of posts from apparent underage Google+ users looking to share and trade sexually explicit photos of themselves or engage in sexually explicit texting. In one of the examples, requests for “nude” photos are targeted at children as young as 10 years old. We call on you to take immediate action to stop facilitating this behavior on your social network.

However, even if you begin to police Google+ adequately – and you must do so immediately – there is still a fundamental design flaw that we believe presents substantial privacy vulnerabilities for users. 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 Circle. 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 Circle, no matter what, once that person has placed them in their Circle. A user is forced to be publicly associated with someone with whom they do not wish to be associated. We believe this is a fundamental privacy flaw and must be fixed. People must have the right to choose with whom they are associated.

Mr. Page and Mr. Schmidt you must not turn a blind eye to this predatory behavior by continuing to violate users’ privacy in a reckless quest to build traffic on a struggling social network.

As Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood remarked just last week in challenging Google to do more to combat illegal behavior of those using its services:

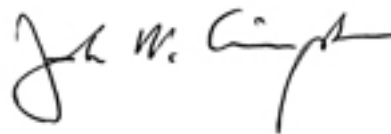
“In my 10 years as attorney general, I have dealt with a lot of large corporate wrongdoers. I must say that yours is the first I have encountered to have no corporate conscience for the safety of its customers...”

We agree with Attorney General Hood and call on you to act decisively to protect your users.

Sincerely,



Jamie Court
President



John M. Simpson
Privacy Project Director