



Randall Munroe ▸ Public

Jul 7, 2011



I know I have strong opinions on this subject, so I'll try (but probably fail) to keep this relatively brief. I promise to go back to frog photos after this.

Google+ forces you to have a public gender in your profile (although it can be 'Other'). I know they have reasons for this, but I don't think they're good enough.

Many women grow up with a sense of physical vulnerability that's hard for men to appreciate. Our culture's relentless treatment of women as objects teaches them that they are defined by the one thing that men around them want from them—men who are usually bigger, stronger, and (like any human) occasionally crazy. This feeling—often confirmed by actual experiences of harassment and assault—can lead, understandably, to a lifetime of low-level wariness and sense of vulnerability that men have trouble appreciating. A male designer building an interface should try to keep in mind that there are reasons a female user might feel uncomfortable being told she has to broadcast her gender. Sure, someone's gender is usually obvious from their name, but there's no need to force people to draw extra attention to it—introducing myself with "Hi, I'm Randall." sends a different message from "Hi, I'm Randall, and I'm a MAN."

I don't think making this option mandatory is a significant cause of the major Google+ early-adopter gender split, but if you're worried about how few female users your project has, marginalizing their potential worries on your introductory screen doesn't seem very bright.

There are reasons Google+ might want your gender. For one thing, the interface may need to use pronouns, and in some languages there's no way to avoid this. We have a chat-bot in the #xkcd IRC channel which serves as a repository of user nonsense. At some point, we decided to program in the ability to use pronouns, and it was surprisingly complicated:

http://wiki.xkcd.com/irc/Bucket_Gender

Now, I went out of my way to support the various options for referral that users asked for (although I drew the line at recently-invented pronouns like "xir"). But even covering the basics in English is tricky, and the situation gets more so in languages like Hebrew. (It looks like Google+ punts on that issue by making all "other" users male in all languages, which is a can of worms in itself.) Yet none of the linguistic issues mean you have to make gender a broadcasted part of the user's profile.

They also (obviously) want to know more about you so they can serve ads; advertisers care about gender. But again, that's no reason to make gender public.

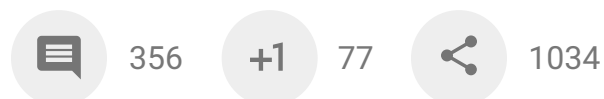
The "other" option is nice, but I don't really feel comfortable setting my gender as "other". There are a huge number of people whose gender is actually best-described as "other", and they come in astonishing variety, even if you set aside the issue of social gender and just ask about biology. This article has a fascinating list of eleven particularly tricky situations that lead to someone having no easy-to-agree-on biological sex:

<http://linuxmafia.com/faq/Essays/marriage.html>

There are quite a few people who are accurately described by an "other" option, and when they're sometimes struggling for recognition, co-opting their label for anyone who doesn't want to broadcast their gender seems a little off-putting.

The bottom line is that there are a lot of reasons Google+ would want to ask about your gender. But there's no good reason to pointedly make it the only thing in your profile that can't be private—and many reasons not to, starting with basic courtesy. It may be a small issue in the grand scheme of things, but I think it's worth getting right.

(P.S. I know I post a lot about interface quibbles and feature suggestions—and I do use the feedback button heavily—but I don't want to give the impression I'm generally unhappy with Google+. Fundamentally, I really like this system, which makes me want to tweak things in this early-adopter period so it will be as well-designed as possible, so it will survive and be around for me to use for a long time.)



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Adria Richards +2

Randall, thank you for sharing this on Google+. I do agree that being female online leads me to be on the defensive...and not that I want to be but for example:

Jul
26,
2011

- On my live Ustream channel, one of the first requests was for me to pull up my shirt while simultaneously pulling down my pants as if the only reason I decided to stream a show was to do a live strip tease for strangers. Because of those first few comments, I got a moderator for my show.

- On YouTube I avoided doing "talking head" videos for fear of the horrible comments I'd seen on other channels of women, and Black women. Because of that and some initial comments I got, I began moderating all my videos meaning I have to manually approve each comment.

- On Flickr, Twitpic and Facebook, I think several times before uploading a photo as it will become indexed and public. Some photos of myself I mark as non creative commons because I don't want someone taking parts of my body or face and putting it on someone else.

I avoid places like Digg that have misogynistic undertones.

Regardless, I still participate in social networks and have learned that I can actually benefit from being social because more people are on the lookout for me. We're a community that looks out for one another. I used to keep my identity private online with vague, non gender specific handles but over time, I've come to trust the Internet community. With that, I continue to encourage other women to create a presence online and stand tall. I know it's hard but we're not alone!



Melissa Kennedy +1

Jul
28,
2011

Ok, just for a moment, let's disregard all of the intersexed, gender queer etc people who have social, political or other issues that make them want to select "other" and, while we're at it, let's forget the feminists and their alleged "anti-male" feelings and the women who are afraid of being victimized.

I am a woman, a geeky, internet friendly woman. I prefer to not make my gender public and it is a big issue for me. Here's why - Some troll can search for people on Google + and just look at all the females within a certain area. The troll could then go through each profile page and then post whatever crap they wanted or send requests etc. Sure, that might not sound like much more than a little bit of a hassle, when it happens several times a day, every single day, it gets almost as annoying as spam bots. It really creeps me out that so many people are trolling through the people searches looking for the ones they find attractive.

In fact, on other sites, I used to get posts from men that I didn't know informing me of the great time they had pleasuring themselves while looking at my photos. (they photos were fully clothed and in no way provocative - not that it matters).

My concern isn't that men are rapist looking to victimize me, it's just that dealing with all of the bullshit is really a pain. It would make my user experience more enjoyable if I could just leave my gender out of it. It doesn't matter what gender I am and for those whom it would make any sort of difference to, already know.



Frances Donovan

Jul
31,
2011

A very articulate and well thought out post.



Stian Høyberg +1

Aug
25,
2011

What, you mean nobody uses "hir"?

Hm, I wonder why



eden andes

Jan
19,
2013

g+ made me male,im not.wouldat least like correct sex,prefer not identifafy.



Lisa A

Jul 2,
2017

bht pyar kiya tha mene 😊😊😊😊😊 click -

<http://goo.gl/hT7GVX> 😊😊😊😊😊



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