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Google circles Middle East in pushing 'Plus' social network



Al Arabiya, Dom Desouza

Google has made a few false starts in social media –but says its latest platform is here to stay.

A senior executive from Google+, the U.S. web giant's answer to Facebook, this month embarked on a visit to the Middle East, in an attempt to drum up support for the service.

Steve Grove, the head of Community Partnerships at Google+, told Al Arabiya that he was scheduled to meet media and entertainment companies –and even representatives of Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum –to drum up interest.

Recent research shows that Google+, which launched in 2011, now stands as the world's second-largest social network, eclipsed only by Facebook. The site features 'circles' of friends with which users can share specific information, as well as a video-chat feature known as 'hangouts'.

Yet despite boasting 500 million registered users, some analysts have pointed to a lack of engagement on Google+, with many users accessing the site infrequently.

Grove says the site is still growing, as he explained the potential of Google+ in the Middle East and beyond:

Q&A with Steve Grove, the head of Community Partnerships at Google+

Tell us about your visit to the Middle East.

We want to learn. It's a new region for us, a new space for us to be growing Google+. I really think that the events that are happening over here are influencing the rest of the world in some really profound ways. So part of our visit is to get more media companies engaged in Google+, to get them more active... We are meeting with a lot of media organizations and also some entertainment organizations too, to see how they're thinking about social and share our vision with them.

You famously held a 'hangout' with U.S. President Barack Obama. Is there anyone in the Middle East you are talking to about doing something similar?

There have been a lot of hangouts locally; we've done some with Emirates Airline... We've got Sheikh [Mohammed, Ruler of Dubai] on Google Plus. We don't have him posting yet, but we have him talking with our team about doing more.

Including a hangout?

Nothing that we can announce right now... We would love to see the Sheikh in a hangout. He's a very personable guy, he obviously has been very devoted to social [media] and so I think it would be a natural thing for him to do.

Do you have any other reflections on the use of Google+ in the broader region, such as during the recent protests in Turkey?

We've seen some breaking news communities form on Google+ to help people curate footage and photos from what's taking place in Taksim Square, which we think is really exciting. One of the really interesting things about this region of the world is that you see people coming to the web on account of social. People are coming to the web, not just for content –sometimes there's not enough content –but also just for social connections. So we really feel that for Google Plus that puts us in a good position in the region because we could lead in our Google outreach with social and go from there.

You claim 500 million Google+ users worldwide. But some commentators say not all are 'active'. How happy are you with actual participation on the platform?

We're really happy with the participation. We've got 390 million 30-day active users across all Google properties, including [people clicking] '+1' in search, or on YouTube, etcetera... We have 190 million users who are active on a 30-day basis on plus.google.com. So we're humble, we're new, we know that. It's been a year and a half and to have grown that quickly is far outpacing any social technology industry, so we're excited with the growth.

But what about the average time spent on Google+, currently measured in minutes compared with hours on rival site Facebook?

The number that we like to point to for activity is for the user that hits the stream on Google+. Once they land on plus.google.com, the average amount of time they spend for that one session is 12 minutes, which we're very happy with and we think that's really strong.

You're at 500 million users today. What's your target a year from now?

We don't have any publicly declared targets for Google+, but the growth has been really exciting. You know, we've launched other social features in the past. You've seen and heard about Buzz and certainly we had Wave and things like that. Some of those didn't really grow as we wanted them to, but Google+ is here to stay... If you look at interactive technologies, there's this sort of tipping point that you reach when enough of a percentage of a group comes on. And some of that will just take time for us to get to, but the growth towards those numbers is strong.