

New Facebook status options applauded by gay users

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This screenshot made on Friday, Feb. 18, 2011 shows the relationship status options in a Facebook profile. Facebook has added "In a civil union" and "In a domestic partnership" to the Relationship Status section. (AP Photo/Facebook)
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(AP) -- Jay Lassiter is no longer "in a relationship."

Let's clarify that: Lassiter, a media adviser for political campaigns who lives in Cherry Hill, N.J., is still with his partner of nearly eight years, Greg Lehmkuho. But since Thursday, when [Facebook](#) expanded its romantic-status options, Lassiter's profile there echoes his relationship's legal status: "Domestic partnership."

It may not be a life-altering change. After all, you can call yourself anything you want on a social network. And Facebook is merely that.

But, Lassiter notes: "I'm no different from all those other Facebook users whose identity is tied up with their Facebook pages, for better or for worse."

And so, he says: "It's high time. It's an affirming gesture. It's sort of one tiny step for gays, but a giant leap for gay rights."

Facebook's addition of civil unions and domestic partnerships to the list of relationships its users can pick from came after talks with gay rights organizations, including GLAAD, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

The social network has "sent a clear message in support of gay and lesbian couples to users across the globe," said GLAAD's president, Jarrett Barrios. "By acknowledging the relationships of countless loving and committed same-sex couples in the U.S. and abroad, Facebook has set a new standard of inclusion for social media."

He added that the new status options, available to Facebook users in the U.S., Canada, Britain, France and Australia, will serve as an important reminder that legal marriage is not an option for gay couples in most states.

Only Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Washington, D.C. allow same-sex marriages. Hawaii will soon become the seventh state to permit civil unions or similar legal recognition for gay couples.

Of course, there's also a Facebook option to say "It's complicated" - and that's exactly how some users felt about the new changes. Because, for people both gay and straight, more options mean more decisions to make: What exactly is my relationship, and what should I call it?

"You go into a store and there are 27 kinds of soda, and sometimes it would be easier if there were just Coke and Pepsi," explains Erik Rueter, who works in marketing at an educational nonprofit institution in Pittsburgh.

To Rueter, the essence of his relationship is crystal clear: He and his partner, Robb, will be together forever. "We complete each other's sentences," he says. "We'll be sitting there in the nursing home, gumming up each other's food, chasing each other in our wheelchairs."

Two years ago, Rueter, 34, proposed to his partner on bended knee, despite the fact that in Pennsylvania they cannot marry. They've been engaged ever since, and that's been his Facebook status - until Thursday, when he changed it to domestic partnership.

But Rueter is conflicted about the change.

"Part of me wants to go back to 'engaged' - because I still am," he says. "Part of me wants to say 'married,' as in, 'I don't care what the law says.' And part of me says, 'It's just Facebook!'"

And then ANOTHER part of Rueter tells him just how powerful and influential Facebook is, with well over 500 million users across the globe. "Just having the option to say, 'This is what my relationship is' is a really good thing," he says.

It can be a good thing for some straight Facebook users, as well. Michael Stimson, a Scot who lives in Marseille, France, is not married to his partner, Izzy (short for Isabelle), but they live together and have a young son. He's just changed his status from blank to domestic partnership.

For Stimson, it helps to clarify to other users with whom he's chatting that he is not, well, available. "People do flirt with you on the Internet,"

he says. "I like to put them in the picture a wee bit, so there's no confusion."

Izzy approves of his decision. "Most people that you speak with on Facebook are people you don't know," she says, speaking in French from home in Marseille. "This makes things more clear."

Of course, there are no political overtones to the couple's change in status. In the United States, though, there is a passionate debate over gay marriage. Lassiter, the campaign adviser from New Jersey, changed his status from "in a relationship" to "married" last year in an act of political defiance, he says, when the state legislature rejected a bid to recognize gay marriage.

But it just didn't feel right, and he changed it back to "in a relationship" months later. Besides the fact that "married" wasn't accurate, "I'm not really the marrying type," he says. "Me and my partner have an equilibrium as things are."

But "in a relationship" made it sound like a high-school relationship, rather than one that's lasted a number of years.

So the new status feels better, says Lassiter. And he's been encouraged by the positive feedback he's gotten on just the first day from Facebook friends - including people from as far back as high school - giving him a thumbs-up.

Lassiter also thinks the change is most important for gay people - especially younger ones - living in areas of the country where their sexual orientation is less accepted than in the liberal Northeast.

"For those people, it legitimizes being in a gay [relationship](#)," he says.

And so, maybe a social network can be something of an agent of social change.

After all, Lassiter says, "As Facebook goes, so goes the world."

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