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Ask me anything: what is Reddit?

Katie Elson Anderson

Reddit, stylized as reddit (reddit.com) calls itself “the front page of the internet” and describes the site as “a source for what’s new and popular on the web[1]”. In many cases, items that are popular on Reddit become viral, appearing on other social media sites and in the news several days later. The site’s content is supplied by its users, and the popularity of that content is also determined by the membership. While the site can be described simply as an aggregator of user provided content, this simple description does not adequately capture the essence of the Reddit community and the impact of that community and its generated content on society. Librarians should be aware of this impact and the potential that Reddit possesses for connecting with a number of different communities.

How does it work?

There is no cost for joining Reddit, though there is an option to purchase “Reddit gold”, which is a premium membership (\$3.99/month, \$29.99/year) that provides additional features and benefits. Registering is simple, with very few restrictions. Users may register for multiple accounts, and usernames can be anonymous without even being linked to an email account. Registered users, known as “Redditors”, post either a text post or a link, but there are limits to the number of posts a user can make in a specific time period to discourage spamming. Text posts are categorized as “self posts”, and links can be to a number of different formats, including articles, photos and videos. Self-posts also include the AMA or, Ask Me Anything. These AMA’s have brought Reddit to the attention of more mainstream media, particularly with President Obama answering his own AMA in 2012. The content that is posted can be voted on by other Redditors who demonstrate whether

they like the content by clicking on an up arrow (upvote) or a down arrow (downvote). Users also may make comments on the initial posting, as well as on other comments. These comments also receive upvotes and downvotes. When a Redditor’s content or comments receive upvotes, that user earns “karma points”, while losing karma points for downvotes. Karma is awarded separately for links and for comments. Karma points are not earned for self- (text) posts. This karma point reward system encourages users to post good content, make useful comments and also provide relevant feedback. Members of the community may gift other Redditors with “reddit gold” when they wish to award at an even higher level. This system is not unlike other features in social media that encourage users to share and interact with content, such as Facebook’s “like” button, and retweeting on Twitter. The presence of karma gives the Reddit community the ability to assess a specific user, as those with more karma are considered to be more highly valued within the collective. It is easy to see another Redditor’s activity and karma points by clicking on the user name.

Anyone can read and discover content on Reddit even without registering for an account. Items on the front page are categorized into tabs; Hot, New, Rising, Controversial, Top, Gilded, and Promoted. Content that is rapidly gaining popularity is listed under Hot. Most recently posted items appear under new. Rising indicates that the item is receiving upvotes but not at the same momentum as Hot. Controversial indicates that the number of upvotes and downvotes are equitable, showing dissension among the community. The items that have achieved the most number of upvotes appear under Top. Gilded content shows the posts that have received gifts of reddit gold. The Promoted tab includes content from Reddit’s advertising partners as well as

content being promoted by Reddit itself. An additional tab on the front page is a wiki for essential information on the site and how it works, including a description of reddiquette, the community’s etiquette guidelines.

All posts to Reddit must be assigned a “subreddit”, which can be defined as a community that is focused on a specific topic. Subreddits can be created by any user and are also moderated by members of the Reddit community. The ability to subscribe to subreddits makes the Reddit experience customizable, allowing users to see only posts relevant to their interests. These communities can be located through search, suggestions and discovery. Users can subscribe to their favorite subreddits and choose to view just those on their front page, rather than all posts. Subreddits are identified with the naming convention “/r/subreddit”, which is used in the URL for direct access. For example, a subreddit for libraries would be listed as /r/libraries and the direct URL is reddit.com/r/libraries. Reddit reports 9,379 active communities (defined as communities with at least five posts or comments) on their About page[1].

Reddit’s format and design is simple – enhancement tools and a mobile app allow for a customizable viewing experience. The number of votes for a post appears next to it, along with the arrows for upvoting or downvoting. The date and time of submission, location of the post (subreddit) and comments appear under the clickable title of the post. A user may share, save, hide or report the post. Clicking on the title will bring one to the original link or the original text with the comments appearing below. Users may add a new comment, reply to an existing comment and vote on the comments.

The best way to learn more about Reddit is to observe and participate. Several how-tos and beginners’ guide

are available from a number of sources. A suggested place to start is *Mashable's* "Reddit: A Beginners Guide" (Silverman, 2012).

When and where did it come from?

Reddit.com was founded by Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman in 2005. According to the About page, the first link was posted by them in June 2005, a post about the Downing Street papers[1]. It was purchased in 2006 by Advance Publications, parent company to Conde Nast and is currently estimated to be worth at least 240 million dollars (Anders, 2012). The ability to comment on submissions was added in December of 2005. Growth continued rapidly with the creators promoting feedback from users and giving users monitoring responsibilities. In March 2008, users were allowed to create their own subreddits. The code behind Reddit was made available to the public for download in June 2008 in a move toward opens source. Additionally, the public were invited to submit code to improve the site. As noted above, the site gained publicity when it hosted President Obama's AMA in 2012[2]. A detailed timeline is available on the About page, and much of the creative process and development of the site is chronicled on the Reddit blog[3].

Who is using it?

According to the About page, in February 2015, there were 151,712,210 unique visitors from 212 countries with one million computer members logged on a daily basis. A 2013 Pew Internet Study found that 6 per cent of online adults are Redditors, with male ages 18-29, representing the largest group of users (Duggan and Smith, 2013). It is not clear if these statistics include those without accounts who visit the site. What is clear is that writers for online news sites are also reading it; stories posted on Reddit are often features on popular online sites such as BuzzFeed in the following days (Dewey, 2015).

Tell me the good, the bad and the ugly

One of Reddit's strengths is in its sense of community, there is a subreddit for any and every interest, and if there is not, it can be easily

created. Within each of these subreddits exists a unique community with a distinct sub-culture, a social scientist's dream. The appeal, in many cases, to the users is their sense of belonging, as well as a feeling of validation when a submission or a comment is upvoted. Generally, the Reddit community is welcoming to new users, as long as they follow the rediquette. The importance of rediquette is maintained by the Redditors themselves; those who breach rediquette will be called out and corrected. There is a hierarchical nature to the site and some communities due to the earning of karma; self-promotion is one of the gravest mistakes a new Redditor can make. When rediquette is breached, members of the community respond to rudeness, trolling or spam with downvotes and reporting of the guilty parties.

The first two items listed on rediquette are "remember the human" and "adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life[4]". While self-promotion is frowned upon, positive behavior is rewarded through upvotes that result in high karma. Informal observation of several subreddits provides a number of examples of the community striving to assist those in need, from very serious discussions regarding suicide to lighter matters of someone looking for a the title of the book they read in third grade with only a memory of the cover. In some cases when users go to extreme measures to help other users, members of the community may reward these users with reddit gold. A recent example that was recognized in the mainstream media was when a grieving father posted a request to Reddit to alter a picture of his deceased daughter to remove the tubes that had sustained her during her brief life. The results were an outpouring of heartwarming recreations of the posted photo that not only included a number of Photoshoped images but personal stories, words of comfort and sharing of support communities (Pawlowski, 2014).

The Reddit community is a fierce defender of rights, from free speech to net neutrality. Reddit was the first site to suggest a blackout on January 18, 2012 to protest the Internet censorship bills Stop Online Privacy Act and The Protect IP Act, Preventing Real

Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act[5]. The community continues to be aware and act on threats to the Internet, fighting Federal Communications Commission's recent proposed anti-net neutrality rules and even receiving a thank you note from President Obama for the actions[6].

However, the Reddit community does not always succeed in its attempt to do good. The clearest example was when Reddit users attempted to identify the person responsible for the Boston Marathon Bombing. The subreddit /r/FindBostonBombers, which is no longer publicly available, attempted to identify the suspects through the sharing of information found on various social media sites, listening to police scanners and unofficial reporting from individuals in the area. At one point, according to *Time*, "the amount of information available on Reddit during the Boston manhunt was so vast that it even had the capacity to surprise authorities" (Pikert, 2013). However, as with many amateur and crowd-sourced investigations, the vast amount of information was not entirely accurate and an innocent individual was identified. Reddit administrators shut down the subreddit and subsequently apologized to this individual's family.

The case of the misidentified suspect involved the Reddit community's attempt to do what they intended as a good deed turning out badly. Unfortunately, the bad is not always inadvertent, there are users and communities who disregard rediquette and use the site to promote offensive behavior. It is not possible to discuss Reddit without including the darker human element that exists among the positive vehicles of learning and community. The anonymity of the site has led to cases of cyberbullying. Reddit itself does little monitor the subreddits; rather it relies on the moderators to point out lapses in a user's rediquette or breaking of the official rules.

Reddit's actual rules are limited, requesting users not to post spam, ask for votes, post personal information or post child pornography or sexually suggestive content featuring minors[7]. The rules do not restrict offensive content, content known as not safe for work (NSFW). It is often this NSFW content combined with the loose moderation and verdant support of free

speech that brings out the ugly side of Reddit. The worst example of this was user Violentacrez who “issued an unending fountain of racism, porn, gore, misogyny, incest, and exotic abominations yet unnamed, all on the sprawling online community Reddit” (Chen, 2012). When the user’s true identity was released the story exposed more than just his name, bringing to light the fact that Reddit administrators essentially had outsourced the moderating of the creepier side of Reddit to Violentacrez. This expose in the online publication Gawker prompted many subreddit moderators to block material from Gawker and its affiliates in protest, and the real life Violentacrez lost his job. Both of these repercussions unleashed their own protests and controversies.

Why should I know about reddit?

Reddit has many potential uses for librarians. It provides another online space to find communities for both our personal and professional endeavors. The open nature of the site encourages a diverse number of opinions, ideas and individuals. Subreddits such as /r/archivists, /r/books and /r/libraries are diverse communities whose members range from minor hobbyists to library professionals. Librarians may take the opportunity to connect with faculty in /r/professors, or get inspiration from other libraries and librarians in /r/LibraryDisplays/. Libraries and librarians can present themselves outside of their patron base in these communities. For example, Scott Bonner, the heralded Director of the Ferguson Library in Ferguson, MO, conducted a popular AMA addressing the library’s continued community support and actions during the unrest that began in the summer of 2014.

Content on Reddit that can be useful to librarians ranges from links posted by authors of academic journal articles to memes of Grumpy Cat. Some libraries have used popular memes for outreach on blogs, social media and in instruction. Thus, Reddit is an excellent place to find the popular memes, while discovering new ones. Although it is obviously not a place to conduct research, it is becoming a unique place for discovery of content that may be

relevant to one’s job or research. It is also a fascinating example of communities providing questions and answers that match our efforts in information literacy. For example /r/AskHistorians states that it “aims to provide serious, academic-level questions about history”, while highly encouraging sources and discouraging tertiary sources such as Wikipedia. Sanderson and Rigby (2014) point out that the guiding principles of reddiquette “encourage the same skills we try to instill in our students” and match the relevant reddiquette guidelines to tenants of information literacy.

Participating in the Reddit community provides librarians the opportunities to both learn from others as well as to instruct and inform. Our patrons are there, so we can consider being there too. Questions that are not asked at reference desks are being asked on Reddit, and our presence can be useful in either answering them or at least gaining an understanding of our patron’s needs and wants. Libraries can check Reddit for links and comments regarding their services and events and, after having spent some time with an account and not appearing to be too commercial, may consider engaging with the audience. This author does not recommend that libraries use Reddit as an overt marketing tool, and that recommendation is reinforced by others (Sanderson and Rigby, 2014). As with any social media tool used to engage with patrons, there must first be an understanding of the culture and a goal for engagement. It is possible to have a presence on the site without appearing to be promotional.

For example, during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, much of New Jersey was out of commission for a number of days. However, other portions of the state were not affected and students continued to express a need for resources that were limited due to power outages in the affected areas. The library in the unaffected portion of the state monitored the subreddit for the university during this time, and there were students asking about the status of the library services. The library was able to answer these questions and even direct students to available state resources. An informal monitoring of the subreddit by the author continues to demonstrate that students ask general questions about fines, complain about services and even

provide suggestions. Answers to questions about the library and research are often answered by other students, and wrong responses can be corrected gently by librarians, though this author suggests that corrections be done with an account as an individual and not as an organization, as the current culture within Reddit is more likely to embrace an individual over an institution.

How do I get started?

As with most things, the best way to learn and understand Reddit is to jump in and begin using it. Lurking is possible without an account, but once you have created an account, you can begin subscribing to subreddits. Sanderson and Rigby (2014) provide a nice list of suggested subreddits, and searching within reddit is another way to identify subreddits relevant to your interests. You may wish to download the Reddit enhancement suite[8] to give you more customization and, of highest importance, the ability to screen out the NSFW content. Once you have established an account, you may reward posts that you like by upvoting. You also can post things you wish to share within your selected subreddit and watch your karma points rise. Multiple accounts can be maintained, depending on your goals and purposes. The author has several Reddit accounts, one for personal use, one for institutional use and one who masquerades as “random library user” who just happens to know a few things about the library system.

NOTES

1. www.reddit.com/about/
2. www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/z1c9z/i_am_barack_obama
3. www.redditblog.com/
4. www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette
5. www.redditblog.com/2012/01/stopped-they-must-be-on-this-all.html
6. www.redditblog.com/2015_02_01_archive.html
7. www.reddit.com/rules/
8. <http://redditenhancementsuite.com/features.html>

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