Publications and Research   LaGuardia Community College

2015

More Than Just Cat Pictures: Reddit as a Curated News Source

Steven Ovadia
CUNY La Guardia Community College

Recommended Citation

INTERNET CONNECTION

More Than Just Cat Pictures: Reddit as a Curated News Source

STEVEN OVADIA

LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York

Reddit (www.reddit.com) is a site many people have heard of, but not everyone has explored. At its core, it allows users to post content and links to content, with other users voting on and commenting on it. All comments, content, and links can be voted either up or down, with high up-voted content moving up the site display into a higher position. Reddit occasionally enters the news for different occasions, from the Boston Marathon bombings, where Reddit users were trying to identify suspects with varying degrees of success, to users posting pictures of women taken in public without their knowledge or consent (Kaufman 2013). Despite these transgressions, Reddit is a very interesting place that might be used for academic purposes.

The use of Reddit as an online learning environment was discussed thoroughly by Becker (2013), so this article focuses on Reddit as a news source, as well as an interesting community that can itself be studied.

Reddit is actually a collection of smaller communities, called subreddits. Once a user creates an account, the user is subscribed by default to popular communities of varying value to academics. Interestingly, Reddit does not require an e-mail address to create accounts, making for a very low barrier to entry and making it easier for users to create disposable accounts, which can negatively impact discourse, depending upon the community.

The site search allows users to search across the entire site, including posts, or users can limit a search to subreddits. Either method will help uncover subreddits with content related to whatever a user might be looking for. For instance, a search of library science could lead someone to the Libraries subreddit (http://www.Reddit.com/r/Libraries), represented as /r/Libraries in the shorthand of Reddit. Subreddits can be customized

---

Address correspondence to Steven Ovadia, LaGuardia Community College, Library Media Resources Center, 31-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, NY 11101. E-mail: sovadia@lagcc.cuny.edu

completely, with some subreddits looking nothing like the plain, default Reddit template. Most subreddits link to related or affiliated subreddits in a sidebar that is usually on the right side of the desktop site, although given how customizable the content is, the sidebar could appear anywhere on the desktop site.

Reddit has two post concepts: posting a link and posting text. Posting a link will take users to another site, from which they presumably will find their way back to Reddit for voting on the link and joining the discussion, although neither is required. Posting a link is like showing a site to a colleague. Posting text is more along the lines of original content. It could be a question for the subreddit, or it could be a statement of some sort. It could also be a collection of links, as the posting area is more free-form than the link-posting area.

Because users vote on content, higher quality content often seems to rise to the top of the page, although that judgment is subjective and obviously excludes the lower-voted content, which is harder to find and compare against. Lampe, Zube, Lee, Park, and Johnston (2014) studied the website Slashdot (http://www.slashdot.org), which, like Reddit, allows users to vote on comments and content. They found this "distributed moderation" made for more civil discourse, so while it might seem overly democratic to some users more familiar with traditional websites, where all content is presented in an order of importance determined by site editors, there is an argument for engaging the community in the presentation of the content.

There are a number of ways to judge a subreddit. One is the quality of the content itself. Are members posting interesting things? Are members posting reliable content? Another thing to consider is the number of subscribers a subreddit has, which is usually indicated in the side navigation. A subreddit with a few subscribers might have less content than one with a high number. However, this depends on the individual community. There are some small subreddits with a very active community posting content and comments.

In addition to the posted content within Reddit, there are also the discussions of the content. Like everything else online, the quality varies wildly, but there are certain subreddits where the discussion is especially sharp and represents an area worth exploring. Conversely, there are certain subreddits where the discussions are less valuable. And some subreddits are oriented around questions, like AskSocialScience (http://www.Reddit.com/r/AskSocialScience), which lets users post social science questions, with respondents told to use citations to support their claims. This differs from the Social Science (http://www.Reddit.com/r/socialscience) and Sociology (http://www.Reddit.com/r/sociology) subreddits, which are more oriented around users posting links. The nature of Reddit is that links are up-voted based upon popularity, so articles that are not peer reviewed often find their way toward the top of a subreddit. This is enough of an issue that the Society

for the Study of Addiction called upon the media, including Reddit, to rely on peer-reviewed research for "reporting" (Humphreys 2014).

One interesting discussion area is within the Ask Me Anything (AMA) subreddit (http://www.Reddit.com/r/iama) where celebrities and people of note, as well as ordinary people, volunteer to answer questions from the "audience" in the Reddit discussion area. However, given the threaded nature of Reddit discussions, it can often be challenging to follow an interview, as the site does not follow the typical question-and-answer format. Instead, questions are answered by other Reddit users and answers from the main interview subject are often responded to by other users. The site Interviewly (http://interviewly.com) attempts to address this issue by formatting Reddit AMAs in a more traditional question-and-answer format. Interviewly skews toward popular culture figures, and the nature of Reddit is that it's intended for a broader audience. However, there have been some academic digressions within AMA: One featured Dan Ariely, the *New York Times* best-selling author and Duke University behavioral economist. Another featured the University of California, Irvine faculty team running a massive online open course about the TV show *The Walking Dead*. AMA interview subjects must post some form of proof that they are who they claim they are. The proof is usually something like a photograph with a note about the AMA or a tweet confirming the AMA.

Besides serving as an interesting place to discover curated content, Reddit itself has been the subject of some interesting research. Howard and Magee (2013) explored online group identity through three studies, including Reddit in two of them, and discovered that students identified with online groups. Mikal, Rice, Kent, and Uchino (2014) examined imgur (www.imgur.com), the popular image-sharing site closely associate with Reddit, as imgur is often used to host content that is then shared and discussed on Reddit. Their findings regarding imgur could easily apply to Reddit, though:

> Research in social psychology has conceptualized social support as a function of number of relationships, or number of interactions. Yet the notion that online groups function as a single unit due to the normative pressure of cultural norms means that these models would need to be reconstructed to accommodate online support exchanges. (514)

Not everyone will find Reddit helpful. As alluded to earlier, Reddit is not without its dark corners of sexism, racism, pornography, and bad taste. One of the drawbacks of anyone being able to create a subreddit is that anyone can create a subreddit. Some communities try to protect their conversations by making their subreddits private, meaning the conversations are not publicly viewable and members must be approved. The utility of Reddit, especially for academic or professional work, very much depends on the individual subreddit. Some topics and disciplines are better

represented than others, and the quality of the community can vary greatly. Still, because of the wide variety in quality, Reddit is worth exploring, if for no other reason than to rule it out as a curated news source. Most academics already have too much to read and process and probably are not looking for even more content; however, the nonacademic nature makes Reddit an interesting place to explore—if not regularly then at least occasionally—to find content and conversations that might not be coming through the usual academic channels.

REFERENCES

Becker, Bernd. 2013. Learning analytics: Insights into the natural learning behavior of our students. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian 32*(1): 63–67.

Howard, Matt C., and Stephanie M. Magee. 2013. To boldly go where no group has gone before: An analysis of online group identity and validation of a measure. *Computers in Human Behavior 29*(5): 2058–71.

Humphreys, Keith. 2014. Action is needed to deter the trumpeting of non-peer-reviewed findings to the media. *Addiction 109*(5): 691–92.

Kaufman, Leslie. 2013. Boston attacks trip up Reddit in its turn in spotlight. *The New York Times*, April 29.B1.

Lampe, Cliff, Paul Zube, Jusil Lee, Chul Hyun Park, and Erik Johnston. 2014. Crowd-sourcing civility: A natural experiment examining the effects of distributed moderation in online forums. *Government Information Quarterly 31*(2): 317–26.

Mikal, Jude P., Ronald E. Rice, Robert G. Kent, and Bert N. Uchino. 2014. Common voice: Analysis of behavior modification and content convergence in a popular online community. *Computers in Human Behavior 35*(June): 506–15.