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Quora.com: Another Place for Users to Ask Questions

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Quora.com: Another Place for Users to Ask Questions

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It's been more than 15 years since Ewing and Hauptman wondered whether reference was an obsolete practice (1995, 3). The issue has been debated many, many times since then, and probably quite frequently leading up to the publication of their article. Whether or not reference is obsolete, there is no denying that its practice is evolving.

Quora (www.quora.com) is a contemporary, web-based take on reference. Users post questions within Quora and other users answer the questions. Users can vote for and against answers (or not vote at all). It is users asking questions of friends and strangers and then sorting through the results.

If the model sounds familiar, it's because it is. There are many active question-and-answer sites, like Yahoo! Answers (answers.yahoo.com), Askville (askville.amazon.com), and Ask MetaFilter (ask.metafilter.com). Shah, Oh, and Oh (2009) defined social question and answer sites as online questioning and answering using peers. In the case of Quora, one can invite peers to answer a question, via tools like Twitter and Facebook, but questions can also be answered by users the questioner does not know.

The Quora interface, which centers on a feed of questions and answers, might seem familiar to some users, because Quora was founded by two former Facebook employees (Boehret, 2011, D3). Quora lets users track questions (and their answers) by following individuals, following topics, or following specific questions. It is very similar to the Facebook News Feed concept, which has updates and information from all of a user's contacts appearing in a single feed.

The process of using Quora is simple. A user signs in and can immediately start searching for answers to questions. There are specific questions,

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like "Does the U.S. Census have a data team?" But there are also topics, which are subject headings, assigned by users. Users can edit topics, and can add topics to questions. They can also create aliases for topics, so a search on one topic will resolve to the preferred term. For example, as of this writing, the topic Horse resolves to Horses. Users can follow topics, seeing all questions from a given topic in their feed.

Users also see questions from their contacts within the Quora feed. That social element is what makes Quora different from other question-and-answer sites like Yahoo! Answers. Quora focuses on leveraging social connections to get questions answered. It even encourages users to post Quora questions to social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, giving the question more exposure and, in theory, a better chance of getting answered, since friends might be more inclined to answer a question for a friend than they might be to answer the same question asked by a stranger. Exposure on a channel like Twitter or Facebook also lets non-Quora users know about the question. This could lead to someone joining Quora, just to answer a question from a friend or colleague. Quora also allows users to direct questions to specific Quora users.

It makes sense for a site like Quora to make it relatively simple for users to share questions with their social networks. Evans, Kairam, and Pirolli recruited skilled online searchers with large social networks, to study how they conducted research online (2010, 680). One of their findings was that these searchers tended to gravitate toward domain experts for help with certain kinds of questions: "When such target candidates existed they were 'go-to' sources initially solicited for help" (Evans, Kairan, and Pirolli 2010, 685). The use of domain experts also depended upon the availability of the expert. With a tool like Quora, though, availability is not as important a factor, since the specific domain expert can answer a question when she has time.

The question about Quora is, what does it mean for libraries? Will something like Quora eventually replace library-driven reference?

Harper, Raban, Rafaeli, and Konstran divided question-and-answer sites into three types: digital reference services, which are online reference desks staffed by librarians; ask-an-expert services, which are staffed by experts who are not necessarily librarians; and community question-and-answer sites, where any user can answer any question (2008, 866). It should be noted that while anyone can answer any question on a community question-and-answer site, that does not prevent librarians and/or experts from answering questions in that environment. Right now there does not seem to be an easy way to use Quora, a community question-and-answer site, as a digital reference service.

The challenge for librarians trying to find a role in a site like Quora is that there is no easy way for a library to identify its patrons. Questions are organized by topic and by questioner, but unless a library can track all of

its users within Quora, it must simply answer all questions on a given topic, which probably is not feasible for most libraries.

Interestingly, Pomerantz and Stutzman proposed a blog-based collaborative reference model that bears some similarity to the Quora model (2006, 205). In the model described by the authors, questions are posted as blog posts and are answered in the comments section. A model like this is easier to limit to a controlled population, since access can be controlled with logins. Quora, on the other hand, is open to anyone.

Part of the appeal of Quora might be that in addition to the social component brought in by users involving their social networks in their answers, the framing of questions is often informal. For example, within the Social Sciences topic is a question asking, "Why are Americans so easily manipulated and controlled despite unprecedented information access?" Where a librarian might receive a question like that and show the patron how to find sources to answer the question, within an environment like Quora, users will answer the question themselves. Some will cite sources and some will use opinion, and it is up to Quora users to decide what is accurate and what is inaccurate.

Quora does provide some tools to make it easier for users to assess the accuracy of answers, as well as to improve them.

Users can comment on answers, offering an opportunity to clarify, as well an opportunity to introduce an inaccuracy. Users can also vote for answers, with more votes theoretically correlating with better answers. To many librarians, it might seem dangerous to leave accuracy to a simple vote, but there is some evidence that reputation correlates with answer quality on certain question and answer sites (Chen, Ho, and Kim 2008, 659). If one considers votes to be a reputation metric, with more votes indicating a better reputation, then it is possible to consider that an answer with lots of votes might be of higher quality. Obviously, further research will need to be conducted to see if that hypothesis proves true.

Part of the appeal of a site like Quora is that it is not as formal as a typical reference transaction. Harper, Moy, and Konstan examined informational versus conversational questions in social question and answer sites (2009, 759). The authors defined information questions as ones "asked with the intent of getting information that the asker hopes to learn or use via fact- or advice-oriented answers" and conversational questions as questions "asked with the intent of stimulating discussion. They may be aimed at getting opinions, or they may be acts of self-expression" (2009, 759). If one defines a reference question as "a request from a library user for assistance in locating specific information or in using library resources in general, made in person, by telephone, or electronically" (Reitz, 2004, 602), which would probably be considered a fair enough definition of reference, then digital reference services would consist almost exclusively of informational questions.

It's interesting to note that digital reference services are not the only question-and-answer services that try to stick to informational questions. Ask MetaFilter is a community question-and-answer site that will remove questions considered to be "chatfilter." The site's Frequently Asked Questions section defines chatfilter for users:

> My Ask Metafilter question was removed as chatfilter. What does that mean?
>
> Ask Metafilter questions need to have some possible answer or should be asking for information that will be put to some practical use. Chatty open-ended questions diminish the usefulness of Ask Metafilter and push other questions off the front page. If you want to avoid having your question flagged and possibly removed, here are some things to avoid.
>
> - Questions where everyone's answer is equally valid along the lines of "What's your favorite X?". Maybe there is a reason you want to know? Super, just put it in your question.
> - Asking the question and giving your own answer before getting the answers of others, saying some variant of "I'll go first." If you can authoritatively answer your own question, it's probably not right for AskMe.
> - Questions with no problem to be solved or where the problem is some variant of "I'm curious if other people feel like I do."
> - Open-ended unanswerable or hypothetical questions like "What if Hitler had never been born?" or made up "what if" science questions. Creating arbitrary constraints and then playing "what if" is not a good use of AskMe.
> - Questions that are some version of "What is the deal with X?"or "X sucks, am I right?" tend to not go well on Ask MetaFilter. Please do not rant on AskMe and pretend it is a question. (MetaFilter 2006)

Ask MetaFilter's more library reference-oriented philosophy is not that surprising, given that one of the site's moderators is a librarian (West 2006, 88).

However, it is also interesting to note that users, in certain contexts, seem to prefer informal, opinion-based answers. Kim, Oh, and Oh, studied Yahoo! Answers and found that users most frequently asked opinion-based, subjective questions and that users were looking to share opinions and suggestions, in addition to looking for a specific, correct answer (2008, 13).

Given that users see question-and-answer sites as an opportunity to share opinions at least as much as a chance to get specific answers, it does not seem that a service like Quora is a direct threat to libraries or to reference. However, it is yet another option for students (and faculty) when they have a research question.

   Librarians providing virtual reference might want to monitor Quora informally, just to see what kinds of questions emerge and whether they might be questions from a local population. Libraries will probably never provide an informal social chat service for their patrons, but if one does notice a pattern in Quora questions, perhaps the issue could be addressed globally, in the form of either an online tutorial, a face-to-face workshop, or an e-mail message to patrons.

   Many social question-and-answer sites seem more about the social element than the question-and-answer element, but it's still an interesting space for librarians to watch. As more users see asking and answering questions and sharing thoughts and opinions as part of the same continuum, librarians might need to evaluate whether their reference offerings need to be altered to accommodate new patron expectations.

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