
Ask Me Anything: Promoting Archive Collections on Reddit

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Abstract: Social media is an important marketing and outreach tool for many libraries. While Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are commonly used, Reddit is underutilized despite its popularity and high user engagement. Special collections can use Reddit to reach and engage with their target audiences, no matter how niche. This article explains how to use Reddit and host an event called “Ask Me Anything” (AMA), using as a model a successful AMA hosted by archivists at the Rochester Institute of Technology. It also provides practical tips including how to choose an appropriate “subreddit” (or Reddit community), promote the AMA, and respond to difficult questions.

Keywords: Academic libraries, archives, outreach, Reddit, social media

As libraries and special collections face shrinking budgets and misconceptions about their usefulness in the 21st century, marketing and outreach have become essential activities. The challenge for many is how to promote their resources, services, and expertise with limited time and money for marketing. Many libraries use free social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to promote their offerings and engage with their communities online, yet Reddit remains an underutilized site, despite its popularity and high levels of user engagement. This article will explain how Reddit works, share how archivists at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) used Reddit to successfully engage their target audience, and provide practical tips to help those interested in using Reddit.

About Reddit

The Front Page of the Internet

According to Alexa.com, Reddit is the tenth most popular Web site globally and the fifth most popular Web site in both the United States and Canada, where it ranks ahead of other social

networking sites Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Visitors are highly engaged on Reddit, spending an average of 13:26 minutes on the site daily, compared to an average of 9:57 minutes per day on the most popular social media platform, Facebook (“Reddit.com Traffic Statistics,” 2018).

Reddit is a collection of thousands of online communities called “subreddits” (commonly referred to as “subs” and prepended with “r/”). In each subreddit, users can share content and discuss particular topics, similar to a forum or discussion board. Each subreddit is a world unto itself with its own rules, customs, and moderators (“mods”). Subreddits vary widely in size and topic, from the broadly appealing r/movies with 18.6 million subscribers, to the arcane r/CarpetsforAirports with just 268 subscribers, to the odd r/birdswitharms for the 189,000 subscribers who like to Photoshop human arms onto birds. With more than 138,000 active communities and 330 million active monthly users, there is something for everyone on Reddit (“Reddit by the Numbers,” 2018).

Each community is self-regulating. “Redditors”—the common name for Reddit subscribers—upvote valuable content and downvote content that is deemed off-topic or otherwise does not contribute to the community’s discussion. The total number of upvotes on a user’s posts and comments, minus the total number of downvotes, calculates a user’s “karma.” This score indicates to redditors how much value the user adds to the community. The most upvoted content across the site makes its way to Reddit’s coveted homepage (“front page”). This collection of trending content, which often goes viral when it is picked up by other sites, gives Reddit its nickname: “the front page of the Internet.”

Ask Me Anything

A popular feature on Reddit is the AMA (short for “Ask Me Anything”), an informal, question-and-answer session usually with someone famous or someone with unique life experience. Redditors post questions, and the interviewee, sometimes referred to as “OP” for “original poster,” can respond to any questions they choose. Redditors take “Ask Me Anything” literally, so interviewees should prepare for swift backlash if they are not willing to answer almost any question. In fact, there is an entire subreddit dedicated to so-called “AMA disasters.” Perhaps the most infamous example is actor Woody Harrelson’s 2012 AMA during which he refused to answer questions unrelated to his latest film. Harrelson’s brusque responses and defensiveness were not well received (“I’m Woody Harrelson, AMA,” 2012).

We’re RIT Archivists, Ask Us Anything!

Why Host an AMA?

RIT Archive Collections has struggled with a lack of public awareness of their resources and services, particularly among students and young alumni. Archives Collections is located on the third

floor of Wallace Library, the sole library building on RIT's main campus in Rochester, New York, and is behind locked doors, which are required for the security of the collections. This arrangement has made it challenging to gain walk-in traffic and attendance at events hosted by the archives. To bridge this gap, the archives team decided to meet the students where they are: Reddit.

RIT's subreddit r/rit has been among the most popular and active college subreddits for years ("Grow a College Subreddit," 2011) and has more than 12,000 subscribers (r/rit, n.d.). According to a Pew Research poll conducted in 2016, 71% of Reddit users are men—59% of them between the ages of 18 and 29 (Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb, & Mitchell, 2016). Reddit's own Audience and Demographics Web page indicates that 87% of their users are under age 35 ("Audience and Demographics," n.d.). This demographic—well educated, tech-savvy men under 35 years old—represents a large portion of RIT's student body and young alumni ("RIT in brief," n.d.). Yet, they are not the typical patrons and donors of RIT's archives. The RIT subreddit was an opportune channel to broaden the archives' reach.

Timing

RIT Archives decided to host an AMA from 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m., eastern time, October 16, 2018. This timing worked well for three reasons. First, 2018 marked the fiftieth anniversary of RIT's 1968 move from downtown Rochester to its current campus location on the outskirts of the city. With many anniversary celebrations and activities taking place throughout the year, there was increased interest in RIT's history. Second, the chosen date was three days before Brick City Homecoming and Family Weekend, which brings thousands of alumni and students' families to campus. Third, October is American Archives Month, celebrated by the Society of American Archivists since 2006 ("American Archives Month 2018," 2018). The confluence of these three events provided the perfect opportunity for the archivists to try this more unusual form of outreach.

Results

The AMA exposed hundreds of RIT students and alumni to the archive collections, educating the community about what they do and the resources they have.¹ Redditors asked 31 questions, and the archivists were able to respond to 20 of them within the hour allotted ("We're RIT Archivists," 2018). Inquiries about RIT history varied widely and included the university's first student club, the number of bricks used to date to construct the current campus (which is affectionately referred to as "Brick City"), and the emergence of longboarding, now a mainstay of campus culture. A self-professed student ambassador and campus tour guide asked several questions, seeking information they could

¹ Reddit does not provide the same analytics that other major social networks do, such as the number of post views. Audience numbers for the AMA are conservative estimates based on the limited metrics available through Reddit at the time of this writing.

share with prospective students and their families during campus visits. Participants also asked general questions about archives, including challenges to preservation and what archivists do on a daily basis. The AMA functioned as a sort of asynchronous reference service. While it did not foster the discovery process in the same way as a traditional, in-person reference interview, it lowered the barrier to entry. The AMA engaged new patrons on a surface level and encouraged further inquiry by referring them to specific resources and by welcoming them to visit the archives in person or have a deeper discussion with the archivists.

Some questions provided opportunities for the archivists to encourage attendance at their exhibition openings and campus tours scheduled for homecoming weekend. Some also increased potential readership and sales of a recent university book that used archival materials to document the history of RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.² Rather than coming across as overt advertising, mentioning the book was appropriate in context, providing avenues for interested individuals to seek out additional information. In addition to the high level of engagement the AMA received, a redditor gave the AMA the Reddit Gold award, a valueless digital currency that redditors often bestow to other users for posts they consider particularly valuable.

Following the AMA's allotted hour, the conversation continued on the thread for several days, and the archivists responded to a few follow-up questions. Most significantly, a 2005 alumnus contacted RIT Archives in a private message on Reddit offering to donate photos of student life taken during his tenure on campus. In a few of their responses during the AMA, the archivists had explained that they were unable to answer some questions, particularly about student life, because of holes in the archival record caused by the acquisition of archive collections primarily through donations. While most university archives focus development efforts on older alumni who are doing estate planning, this unexpected gift presented a potential new model for soliciting donations: fostering relationships with young alumni and encouraging them to donate memorabilia and photographs before they are lost to the university's history.

Tips for Hosting an AMA

1. Familiarize yourself with Reddit.

If you are not already active on Reddit, create a free account and spend some time browsing the site. First, review "Reddiquette," the site's basic rules and expectations as written by its users.³ Next, find a few relevant subreddits to join by conducting a keyword search on the Reddit homepage, then browsing the "Communities and Users" results. Once you have subscribed, spend some time

² James K. McCarthy, ed. *A Shining Beacon: Fifty Years of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf*. (Rochester, N.Y.: RIT Press, 2018).

³ See <https://www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette>.

listening and observing before you begin contributing. Get to know each community's unique vibe: What are their rules and customs? What is their tone? How active are they? Then, begin participating sparingly by upvoting quality posts or responses, replying to others' questions, or posting your own content where appropriate. Redditors despise marketing and self-promotion, so ask yourself before posting: Is this helpful or self-serving? Redditors often use Imgur to share images; make sure you are comfortable uploading images to and sharing images from this service. Lastly, read through past AMAs that were hosted in the subreddits you join or on the dedicated AMA subreddits, r/IAMA (usually for specific, well-known individuals) and r/AMA (usually for people in unusual situations or professions). Note what types of questions users asked and how the interviewee responded, what worked well and what did not work well.

2. Choose the subreddit carefully.

Choose the subreddit that is the best fit for your archive's area of specialty. Remember, there is a community on Reddit for every interest, no matter how unusual or obscure. If you believe you have broad appeal, you could propose an AMA on r/IAMA or r/AMA. A few archivists have hosted AMAs on these subreddits, most successfully the chief of the United Nations Archives. ("I am Bridget Sisk," 2015). While a subreddit with a larger subscriber base may be tempting, choose the right fit over sheer numbers. Go where your target audience is to maximize outreach and engagement.

3. Contact the moderators ahead of time.

Let the moderators know who you are, why you would like to host an AMA, and when. They may ask to verify your account, doing their due diligence for their community to confirm you are who you claim to be. You might also ask the moderators to help promote your AMA by making it a sticky post so it appears at the top of the subreddit's feed for the day it is hosted. In RIT Archives' case, the moderators of r/rit were very supportive of the idea. To verify identity, the archivists were asked to send an e-mail directly from their official RIT e-mail address to one of the moderators. Once this was completed, the moderator added an icon, or what Reddit calls "flair," to the RIT archives account. This was an icon that indicated to the subreddit that they were "Official RIT Archivists." While all AMAs require proof of the host's identity, taking this extra step can reassure subscribers and maintain the integrity of the subreddit.

4. Prepare your description and proof of identity.

Once you have chosen where and when to host your AMA, draft the title and description that you will use when you post your AMA and prepare proof of your identity. Titles follow the formula "I'm _____, AMA." For hosts who do not have immediate name recognition, a brief explanation after their name is appropriate. For example, RIT Archives' title read, "We're RIT Archivists, keepers of RIT

history since 1829. Ask us anything!" The post's description should provide more details about the host, any pertinent background information, and a link to the proof of identity. Proof usually takes the form of a photo of the interviewee holding a piece of paper that states their Reddit username and when they will be hosting the AMA (see Figure 1). Be sure to indicate the time zone for anyone who may be joining in from different time zones.

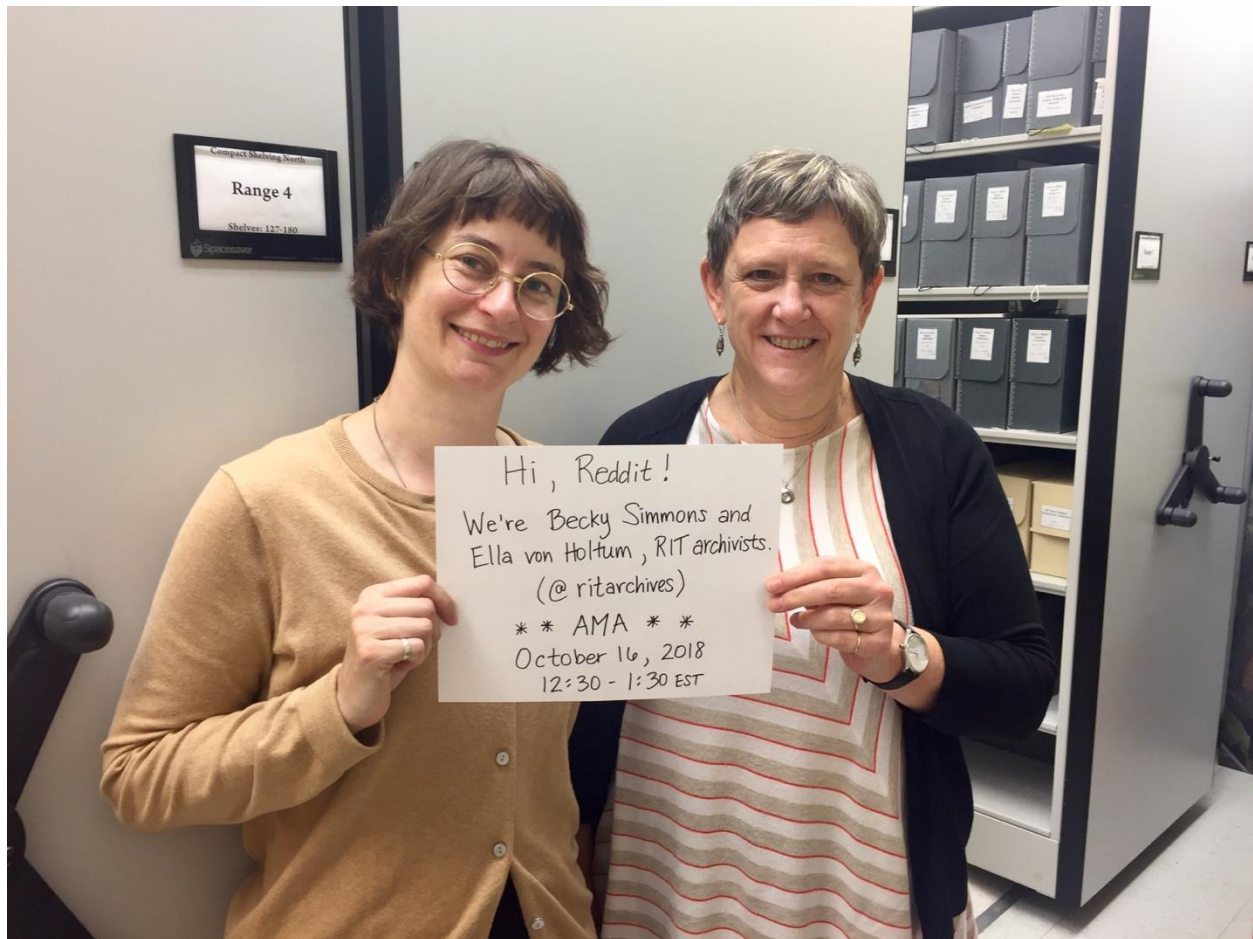


Figure 1. Photo of RIT archivists used as proof of identity in their AMA.

5. Harness the power of social media.

Notify your existing fans, followers, and patrons that you will be hosting an AMA. Posting the image you prepared as proof with the details of your AMA on your official social media accounts can provide further verification of your identity. Coordinate with managers of your institution's other social media accounts to broaden your reach. RIT Archives' AMA was promoted on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram from the main RIT account as well as RIT Libraries' and RIT Archives' accounts. Other official

RIT accounts, regional accounts, and individuals then shared that content or tagged their friends to encourage participation.

6. Consider posting the AMA before the start time.

Posting your AMA up to 24 hours before the planned start time enables redditors to pose questions if they cannot be online during the AMA. This also allows you to research details or pull items from your archives ahead of time that you can share during the AMA. The rules may vary depending on the subreddit you choose, especially if you are hosting on r/IAmA; contact the moderators if you are unsure.

7. Expect the unexpected.

Redditors are notorious for asking difficult questions—they may be pointed, hard-hitting, or off the wall. Know this going in, and be prepared. Brainstorm some types of questions you think you might get and plan how you will respond. Avoidance is not a good plan. Remember Woody Harrelson's poor example: If you are unwilling to answer tough questions or you have something to hide, do not host an AMA.

For example, the child of an alumnus asked RIT Archives about the Central Intelligence Agency's involvement with the university, an opaque and controversial arrangement during the mid-1980s to early 1990s. The archivists responded honestly, linking the user to a finding aid with more information and welcoming them to come into the archives to explore the materials in person. This response was fitting given the value that archivists as a profession place on openness and accessibility. Another user asked, "What is the most shocking piece of RIT history you discovered while perusing the files?" This time, the archivists took a humorous approach, sharing a photo of eccentric fitness instructor Richard Simmons when he visited campus in the 1980s. This response proved to be one of the most popular of the AMA. By having a sense of humor and not dodging some of the tougher questions, the archivists built good will and earned the respect of redditors.

8. Recruit extra help.

Fielding dozens of questions in a short time frame can be daunting. Enlisting colleagues to help the host can allow the subject matter expert to simply be the subject matter expert. RIT Archives' AMA actually involved five people behind the scenes: the two archivists verbally answering questions and pulling archival objects from physical or digital storage, two colleagues taking photos of physical objects and e-mailing disparate files and links to the scribe, and the scribe uploading photos to Imgur and typing all of the responses. To ease this process, the team set up a projector in the archives' Reading Room so everyone could read the questions and the drafted responses before publishing, rather than huddling around a single computer screen. The location also ensured easy access to

archival materials the team wanted to share in their responses. Ultimately, the team effort enabled them to respond to more questions and in greater detail than if the archivists were doing it on their own.

Conclusion

Libraries and special collections do not often consider Reddit for outreach or marketing, but with proper planning and respect for Reddit's unique culture and customs, it can be a useful component of their marketing and social media plans. By hosting an AMA, archivists can broaden their reach, engage with new and younger audiences, and have some fun in the process, all without spending a penny. Beyond the AMA, libraries can use Reddit to provide customer service, respond to patron questions, address misconceptions about libraries, and solicit patrons' input on anything from library programs to collections. Reddit can also be a powerful listening tool. By keeping a finger on the pulse of younger community members through their online posts, librarians can gain a better understanding of millennials' needs, desires, and pain points, and then adapt library services, events, and resources for millennials accordingly.

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