

Today I Learned (TIL): Using Reddit as a tool for public engagement, profile raising and scholarly dissemination.

*Reddit is a social news website that has become a major driver of traffic to blog posts, videos, images and news articles. **Alastair McCloskey** from the University of Sheffield shares his experience using Reddit to engage wider audiences with research. Reddit offers a significant platform for social scientists to disseminate work and engage. Despite only occasionally submitting content to the site, the Faculty website received nearly ten times the amount of traffic from Reddit compared to its referrals from Twitter.*



Over the last few years actors, musicians, astronauts and even US presidents have tapped into the enormous audience of social news website Reddit through one of the site's famous online Q&A sessions known as an AMA ('Ask Me Anything'). But the AMA is not just the preserve of the Obamas and Snoop Doggs of the world. Among the 'mildly interesting' photos of vending machines, US current affairs, and golden retriever GIFs that usually make up Reddit's homepage, it is common to see Ask Me Anythings with academics from across the physical, biological and social sciences disciplines discussing the intricacies of their research with tens of thousands of people online.



For those unfamiliar with Reddit, it looks like a step back into the web's past – an ever-changing, seemingly tricky to navigate mess of subsections, text, links, photos, comments and odd abbreviations (TIL – Today I Learned, ELI5 – Explain Like I'm 5, [and many more](#)). Despite this, its popularity is undeniable and the self-styled 'front page of the internet' boasted 250 million unique visitors and 8 billion page views in April 2016.

Users submit content to the most relevant community known as a subreddit. Other redditors are then able to upvote, downvote and comment on the content which affects the overall 'karma' of a post. An algorithm (fantastically explained in this [blog](#)), takes into account a submission's upvotes, downvotes, and time since it was submitted to decide how well it is performing. The best content rises to the top and the worst sinks into obscurity. The home page constantly pulls the best performing content from the largest subreddits creating a snapshot of what's going on across the site and putting it on view to a potential audience of millions.

With more than 11 million subscribers, the [r/science](#) community is one the Reddit's largest and most active communities. Run by a team of moderators who keep discussions civil and on topic, it hosts AMAs almost daily with academics discussing their work with an audience of thousands of fellow researchers, students and others with an interest in science. It offers the perfect platform for researchers to connect with Reddit's massive built-in following. Increasingly US universities and research organisations, such as the American Chemical Society and mega-journal PLOS One, are making regular use of science AMAs as a way of boosting interest in their work, and raising the profile of academics with a global audience.

It seemed like too good an opportunity to ignore, and so we asked one of our Faculty academics to help us test the potential reach of a Reddit science AMA. Our willing subjects were [Dr Todd Hartman](#), a Lecturer in Quantitative Methods at the Sheffield Methods Institute, and [Dr Rhys Hester](#) from the Robina Institute at the University of Minnesota, who co-authored on a recent paper about racial bias in criminal sentencing in South Carolina. Their research had been widely picked up [by the media](#), and it was a topic that seemed likely to pique the interest of

Reddit's science community and beyond.

↑ [-] [VictorVenema](#) PhD | Climatology 105 points 23 days ago

↓ Is the bias due to a small group of highly biased judges (we could fire), or are nearly all judges biased (do we need education). That would be important information to look for solutions.

More in general: what do you see as effective solutions?

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↑ [-] [Racial_Bias](#) Rhys Hester and Todd Hartman [S] 48 points 22 days ago

↓ RH: I prefer to speak in terms of this research finding evidence of racial disparities in the outcomes (as opposed to evidence of biased judges). The disparities could be the result of explicit or implicit bias, or could also be attributable to other socio-economic factors or legal system process factors that we weren't able to examine. We don't examine judge-level differences in this study, but I have looked into judge differences with this data in other work and I have found a remarkable degree of similarity among judges in sentencing outcomes. It's also important to note that judges aren't making these decisions unilaterally; the sentencing process is highly interactive among the judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney. All that said, and I think this will come up more with some of the other questions, my best suggestions would be: to collect and analyze data as much as possible so that we can access the extent of the problem; and to talk openly about any race differentials (whether they be from systemic disadvantage, implicit bias, or other source). Adopting sentencing guidelines, scaling back war on drug penalties, and reducing or eliminating mandatory minimums are specific policies that would probably help reduce disparities.

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Image credit: Screenshot from the [Racial Bias AMA](#)

Setting up the AMA couldn't have been easier as the r/science team provide [a step by step guide](#), a Google Calendar to check which dates are free and create a dedicated account for the session. So on our scheduled afternoon, we posted [our AMA thread](#) and watched as question after question came in. In under an hour the thread was top of the science subreddit and climbing its way up Reddit's front page. There were detailed discussions around the methodologies used, justice system reforms, media interpretation of the research and the limits of the dataset. For Todd and Rhys, it was an opportunity to set aside a few hours and talk openly and in-depth about their work with a knowledgeable and inquisitive audience that went beyond academia. And despite some frantic typing to keep up with the evolving discussion and follow up questions, they both said it was a lot of fun.

In 24 hours, the AMA had been viewed by around 45,000 people with 600 comments and questions. The thread received thousands of upvotes and reached number six on Reddit's homepage – kept out of the top five by [this polar bear](#). Would this kind of reach been possible via a Q&A on Twitter or Facebook? Possibly – but it would require hours of promotion, an enormous existing following on social media and probably a few planted questions to get the ball rolling. All things that Reddit's AMA format removes the need for.

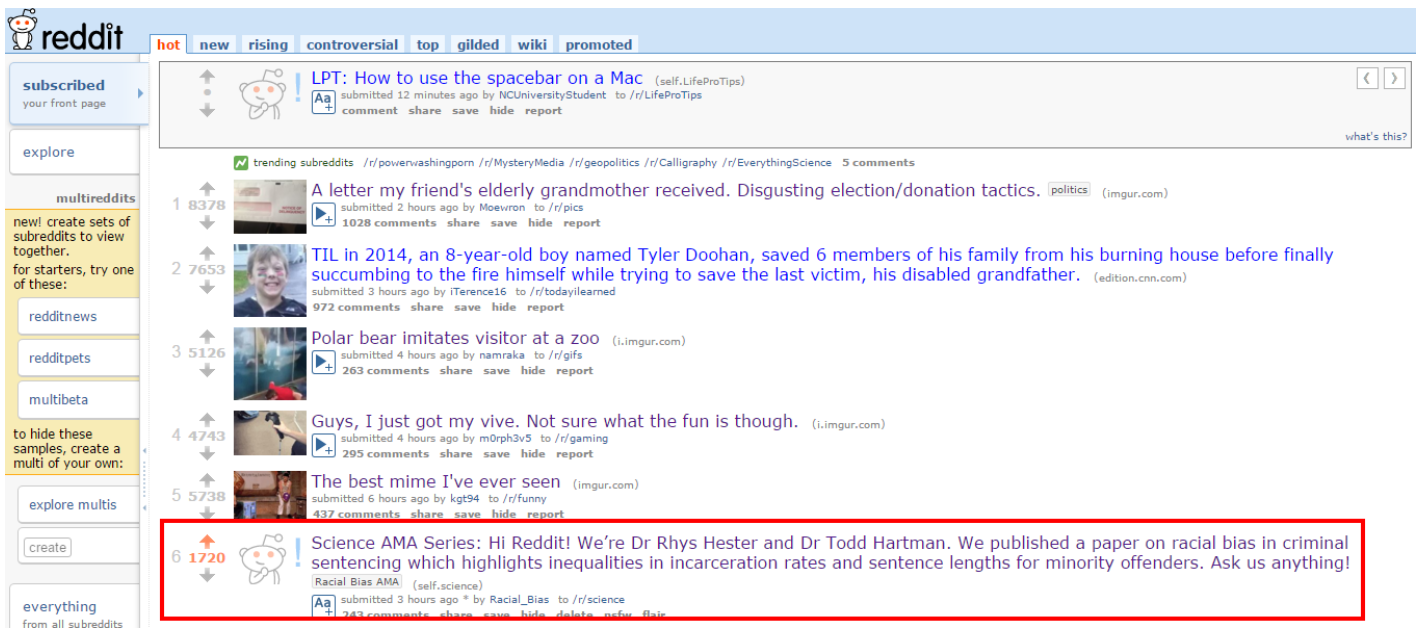


Image credit: reddit homepage screenshot featuring Dr Rhys Hester and Dr Todd Hartman's AMA

And Reddit does not just offer opportunities for social scientists to talk about their research, but also disseminate it. The site has built a reputation over the years as being a driver of huge amounts of traffic to blog posts, videos, images and news articles. The effect on traffic to a website that reaches the top of a popular subreddit can be phenomenal, and millions of views are possible in the space of just a few hours for content that hits the heights of the homepage.

Despite only occasionally submitting content from our Faculty website to relevant subreddits, we received nearly ten times the amount of traffic compared to referrals from Twitter last year. While the majority of this comes from the US, it has also significantly helped to showcase our research worldwide by boosting our hits from Europe, Asia and Australia.

So is it all plain sailing? Nope! Be wary of just using Reddit to overtly promote your own content – it's seriously frowned upon and considered 'bad reddiquette'. AMAs too can backfire if seen as just a chance to advertise a latest work or interviewees don't go with the flow of conversation...just ask [Woody Harrelson](#) amongst others. Each subreddit also has its own set of rules around types of content that can be posted, and submissions that ignore these are usually swiftly deleted. However, contribute to the Reddit community with insightful comments and interesting content, and you'll start to see the power of the internet's front page.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Alastair McCloskey is Digital Content Co-ordinator in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Sheffield, where he promotes research across social media and the web. As well as being a long time redditor, you can find Alastair on Twitter ([@gravityvictims](#)) where he's happy to answer any questions on reddit as a platform for online engagement.

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