

r/rip: why science communicators should mourn the loss of reddit's Ask Me Anything series



Social news website reddit is home to one of the world's largest online science communities, r/science. The community ran a popular Ask Me Anything Q&A series that saw hundreds of academics quizzed on their area of expertise by an inquisitive online audience. However, following reddit's decision to rely solely on its algorithm to surface content to its users, the r/science team announced that the AMAs were no longer attracting the same popularity and would not continue. For **Alastair McCloskey** the demise of the r/science AMAs represents a major setback for science communicators, with no other platform able to offer the same reach, accessibility, and engagement.

With flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, and the rest of the anti-science brigade making their views heard in almost every corner of the internet, it's a difficult time for those who value insightful discussion of peer-reviewed science online. That may be why so many have flocked to [reddit's r/science community](#).

Not your typical comment section

The forum has grown to nearly 19 million users, who are all eager to share, read, and discuss the latest findings from across the scientific spectrum. Hundreds of new articles are submitted each day, with the most popular attracting thousands of views and comments. A dedicated team of volunteer moderators filter submissions to check content is peer-reviewed and remove posts and comments that don't [adhere to the community's strict rules](#). Users are also encouraged to "flair their account" with their scientific credentials so others can see their expertise when following a discussion. It's not your typical internet comment section.



Figure 1: Redditors can flag their scientific credentials next to their usernames (as helm has here) by providing proof to the r/science moderation team.

Reddit has a reputation for its online Q&As, known as [Ask Me Anythings](#) (AMAs), which allow users to quiz actors, politicians, artists, and musicians on, well, anything. And in January 2014, [r/science started its own AMA series](#) allowing researchers to take questions from inquisitive redditors.

The aim of any AMA is to make it to reddit's homepage, known as "the front page of the internet", which pulls the best-performing content from across the site and puts it in front of the millions of eyeballs to visit each day. The r/science AMAs quickly became an almost daily feature; it was not unusual to see them receiving tens of thousands of upvotes from the reddit community, with questions flooding in to researchers on everything from [quantum entanglement](#) to [dog ageing](#). That level of success and visibility helped to attract some of science's biggest names to reddit. [Professor Stephen Hawking took part](#) in an AMA, as did [NASA scientists](#) on a number of occasions, while scientific megajournal *PLoS ONE* had a weekly spot.

But last month the r/science team announced it was bringing the series to an end. The AMAs were no longer attracting the same level of popularity and a lack of questions meant they were no longer worth the effort involved in setting them up.

So what happened?

Problems began last year when reddit made a series of changes aimed at showcasing smaller communities. The homepage began to feature content pulled from nearly every one of reddit's thousands of subreddits, rather than a select number of larger ones, including r/science. As the competition increased, it was clear that a serious discussion about genomic medicine would struggle to match the instantaneous appeal of a [cute animal GIF](#) in the battle for upvotes.

Algorithm manipulation

The platform has also made it harder for moderators of subreddits to manipulate reddit's post-ranking algorithm. It has been claimed that moderators would often delete or hide popular content to give posts a helping hand in making the front page where they would reach a wider audience. The head moderator of r/science [admitted this was the case with the AMA series](#), but justified the intervention by saying that although reddit's audience enjoys science, it doesn't actively seek it out. It needs to be served to them – even if that means bending the rules.

Reddit's decision is one that puts its faith entirely in the algorithm and in the community to keep submitting content that will help the platform to grow. And that decision looks to be one that is paying dividends – reddit recently surpassed Facebook to become [the third most-visited website in the US and the sixth most-visited worldwide](#).

Unrivalled in reach, accessibility, and engagement

But as someone involved in communicating academic research online, the demise of the r/science AMAs represents a major setback. The platform it offered was unrivalled in reach, accessibility, and engagement. It didn't require building an audience from scratch or paying to put it in front of one as you would need to do with Facebook. There was no character limit as Twitter imposes, allowing for in-depth, back-and-forth questions and answers between users and academics. And it's far easier to follow and engage with an AMA conversation than a lengthy Twitter thread.

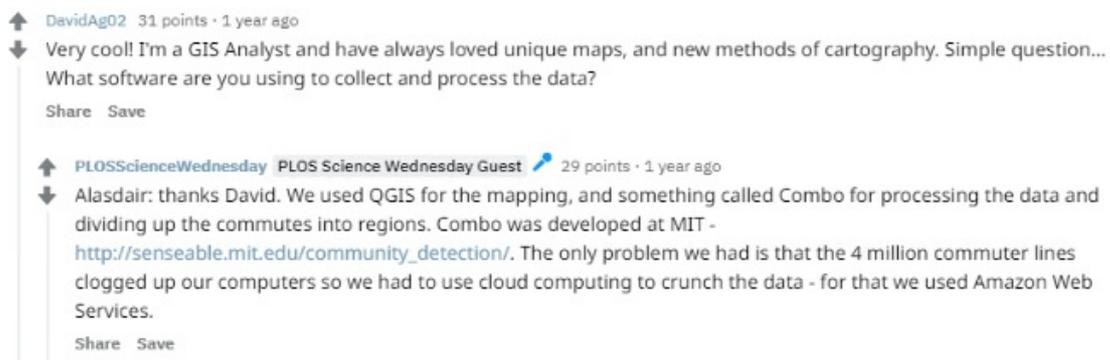


Figure 2: Though a bit old-school, reddit AMA threads are straightforward to follow and accessible for users.

The audience of reddit is also much broader and more diverse – it's not just academics talking to academics as Twitter often is. In the science AMAs I was involved with we saw students, teachers, scientists, science communicators, people in industry and policy, as well as the general public all chip in with questions, feedback, and their own personal experiences. It broke down the barriers that exist between science and academia and the wider world. Users could question methodology or suggest new areas of research and receive a comprehensive response from someone at the forefront of that field a few minutes later. And from the academic perspective, the constant moderation ensured the tone remained civil and polite, making convincing a nervous or reluctant researcher to take part in one a much easier sell.

So where do we go next? At a time when being an expert is seen by some as something to be reviled, it feels more important than ever that we look for opportunities to maintain direct contact between the academy and the wider world.

The r/science team has announced that any future AMAs will take place on the dedicated Ask Me Anything subreddit, r/lAmA. It's likely that science-based AMAs, particularly those featuring leading names, will once again reach the fabled front page but those taking part won't benefit from the level of support and moderation r/science offered. That might be off-putting to researchers who feel their area of expertise leaves them exposed to online trolls.

On other social media, it will be the science accounts with already-substantial followings that become the gatekeepers of communicating research with the public. This will limit opportunities and concentrate power into the hands of a few, who will be able to set the agenda and rules around using their platform.

So maybe it's time for us to acknowledge that some content has an inherent value and deserves to be put in front of an audience, even if an algorithm won't.

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.

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About the author

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