Opening of panel

Hello and welcome to this panel titled “AskHistorians”: Outreach and Its Challenges in an Online Space.” I think we would all agree digital history is a real opportunity for the humanities. We reach new audiences, we disseminate information quickly, and if we so choose, we can add depth and colour to more traditional teaching and outreach strategies. But no one ever said it was easy. This panel will focus on the most successful online digital history outreach project in terms of size. It is called AskHistorians, a forum on the website aggregator Reddit. It has at present roughly four hundred thousand subscribed members, give or take fifty thousand. This community is managed by just 30 part-time volunteers.
Four of them are here today. /u/vertexoflife, /u/Celebreth, /u/ lngwstksgk are all current team members I am a former mod, and this is a panel about doing better online history.

Just as general housekeeping; the panel has very tight timings between speakers. At the end there will be an open-forum opportunity for questions, so please hold them until then. And now, without further ado, I’d like to present /u/vertexoflife an Independent researcher in pornography and obscenity. He will lay the groundwork for the remainder of the papers with a short introduction to how architecture and structure.

VERTEXOFLIFE SPEECH:

Hello everybody and welcome. I would like to thank the American Historical Association for hosting us and, to Jacob Ingram for encouraging us to submit this panel. My name is vertexoflife, and I am a historian of pornography and obscenity, but I’m here today as a member of Reddit’s AskHistorians community. The purpose of my speech is to explain to the uninitiated what exactly Reddit and AskHistorians are, but almost more importantly, it is my job to contextualize our forum within the larger scope of what it means to be a public intellectual practicing history in the digital age. With this information, you will be able to fully understand the following presentations that my colleagues will give, which will drill deeper into what we have learned about online history outreach, and how it applies to others. So without further ado…

Our case study is AskHistorians. Essentially this is a subforum of a much larger website called Reddit. Founded in 2005, Reddit stylizes itself as ‘the front page of the internet,’ and is a series of thousands upon thousands of bulletin boards on every possible topic

imaginable. Indeed, if you were to visit the website today, you would see links and posts about anything from current politics, to scientific breakthroughs, sports, television, cute animals, or even personal finances. The difference between the front page of reddit and the front page of a curated newspaper like the New York Times is that registered users can 'upvote' posts to the top, or they can choose to 'downvote' them to the bottom and off the page.

Thus it is important to note that a game layer is built into the very bedrock of the forum we used to build our community. The specific up-vote/down-vote game-layer of the Reddit platform is a strength in that the content of thousands of subforums (called subreddits) allow the users to (hopefully) vote the best content to the top, and thus create an eclectic and hopefully interesting take on what is important on the internet at any given time. When a person makes an account with reddit (which requires nothing more than a username and a password) they can also choose their own subreddits based on personal taste and thereby curate their own front page. For example, a San Francisco based photographer might subscribe to the San Francisco, nature, hiking, and photography subreddits, whereas a computer programmer in Boston might subscribe to the Boston, nerd, programming, or videogame subreddits.

A registered user can also create their own subreddits with subreddit-specific rules and goals. What this means is that Reddit can sometimes be like a major city—there are both good neighborhoods and bad ones, places you want to go and places that should be avoided. One of the good subreddits—and a place we hope you will go—is AskHistorians, the purpose of our panel today. AskHistorians was founded in 2011 by Arthur Wardle, an undergraduate student at Utah State University. In doing so he was inspired by another popular subreddit called askscience. The premise of AskHistorians is that any registered Reddit user can ask any sort of question out of our panel of experts. It is the simplest kind of community one could build – a question and answer session, and for our purposes here it is great. The bare-bones interactions reveal a lot of important things which people might not consider when approaching digital history.

Now, I can hear the two challenges to that last statement. "any sort of user can ask any question?! On any topic?!" and the second is, of course "well…how do you define 'expert?'"

So, let's break that statement down a little further. further. Every community – online or off – has rules to regulate behavior, either implicitly or explicitly. Good rules are foundational to good online communities, and therefore good outreach. This includes

AskHistorians. We have a (very detailed) set of rules for both questions and answers, and these rules are strictly enforced by a moderation team, which includes four of the people you see up here, as well as 30 others.
AskHistorians is famous for its strong moderating style because we want to ensure both quality and civility of discourse in our neighborhood. This strict moderation policy came out of a struggle to create a diverse and inclusive space, which, if you've ever seen the comments on a news article or youtube, you know can be quite the struggle. This is something cephalopodie will talk about in a later speech.

When it comes to asking questions, we have a series of straightforward rules—the first of which is that no questions that concern current events (defined as 20 years ago) are allowed. This rule is to prevent the soapboxing and arguments that come with current politics. As an extension of that, we don't allow loaded questions like "Why is Nixon considered the worst American president? Why not Obama?" We also prohibit poll-type questions, these are the sorts of questions that use phrases like "best, worst, least" or "most." As I'm sure you all know, it is just about impossible to answer a question like "Who was the best general in history? or What was the worst thing humanity has ever done?," despite the fact that many historians have spent their careers proving just how futile it is. Obviously, a normal outreach project would be more focused. The boundaries of how the community will interact with itself and with the organizers will be shaped by what you are trying to achieve and the content you provide.

To give you a few examples of some of our most popular questions:

- In films and "Schindler's List," German guards seem able to kill prisoners at any time without restriction. Did concentration camps and ghettos have rules stating when and how soldiers could kill inmates?
- How hard was it to supply arrows to archers in ancient battles?
- Did Pirates get terrible sunburn & skin cancer due to overexposure to the sun?

To find out the answer to those questions…well, I guess you'll just have to visit AskHistorians, huh?
Next, we come to our rules about answers, which will also answer the question of how we define experts. Any answer in AskHistorians is expected to be comprehensive and informative, in line with historiography and the historical method, and include sources and citations where possible. We tell people to ask themselves four questions before they even write a post on AskHistorians, which are:

- Do I have the expertise needed to answer this question?
- Have I done research on this question?
- Can I cite my sources?
- Can I answer follow-up questions?

Furthermore, any answer that depends on speculation is removed, as are answers that are purely anecdotal, political, or moralizing, or that are plagiarized, and the account is banned. Banning a user from further participation is the method we use to further enforce our rules on the subreddit.

Those form the core content we deliver, but there is also a secondary element to the community –courteous thank yous, discussions about potential ramifications of the information, and follow-up questions. This allows the discussion to be not just between the questioner and the expert, but among the whole community. Engagement of the community is the constant goal of any outreach project, and fostering respectful secondary discussions is one way to keep people coming back.
Those experts that I referenced earlier? All 400+ of them had to follow these guidelines in providing at least three quality answers on the topic of their expertise, answers that are reviewed and vetted by other experts and moderators. When their application is accepted, they are awarded a title near their name, called a 'flair.' For example, my flair marks me as being an expert in "Pornography and Obscenity, and the History of Privacy."

The Flair is another kind of game-layer – a visible reward system recognizing trusted users, encouraging their engagement with the community, and providing role-models to the base users. The result is that our experts run the gamut from self-taught hobbyists to M.A. students looking to engage with a larger audience to practicing historians and college professors to professional archaeologists and linguists, some of whom are well-known in their respective fields. And they keep coming back.

We will have more on this a later presentation, but needless to say, over the past four years our project has become tremendously more successful than even we could have hoped, and has sponsored number of events which we call AMAs. An AMA, short for Ask Me Anything, is a neat little concept that we inherited from the culture of Reddit as a whole, where an expert in the field, such any of you in the audience can come and volunteer to field questions from a large forum of people who are interested in your history and research. If you're interested in jump-starting your own outreach perhaps you could come talk to me at lunchtime after the panel and we could organize one for your museum or institution.

Over the past few years we've hosted AMAs with published experts such as

- James McPherson, author of Battle Cry of Freedom.

· Alex Wellerstein, creator of the NukeMap, and the author of Restricted Data, the nuclear secrets blog.
· Elaine Chalus, professor at Bath Spa university.

We've also been lucky to have AMA interviews with

· Timothy Potts, director of the The Getty Museum, who discussed what sort of art he has in his home, and how he goes about selecting works for the museum, and what role the museum plays in public culture.
· Experts from The National Air and Space Museum, who have discussed many aspects of their museum's goals and ideas.

The final way in which we have tried to make history more accessible to the public and to engage in a larger context is through our AskHistorians Podcast, which has been tremendously successful. The podcast, which is run by another moderator, Sean Kiskel, and hosted right here in Atlanta, Georgia. These podcasts are a way for individual flairs or members to really dig into a specific topic and explore it in an hour or an hour plus long episode. Some of the more notable ones have included an interview with our Margaret Harris, an interview with the duo Dr. Jennifer Evans, and Sara Read on Early Modern Medicine, or the recent episode on Canadian Identity by Geoff Keelan.

The following presentations will touch on the points in this speech in more depth. First, Celebreth will outline the challenges of being an online institution. Second, Margaret will address the larger picture and the difficulty of creating audiences in the digital realm. Third, cephalopodie will address the challenges of moderation and creating inclusive spaces. Finally, to round out our presentation, lngwstksgk will address lay historians and positive outcomes and provide hard evidence of the value of AskHistorians.

I believe that AskHistorians is a key platform in what it means to be a public intellectual and a historian in the digital era, and I would be happy to invite each and every one of you to participate, either in AMA, podcasts, or by participating in the community itself. I will be available after the panel if you would like further information in how to participate.

Our next speaker is /u/Celebreth, a student of history at Northwestern State University who will be speaker on the topic of how institutions can learn how to translate themselves onto the internet. Celebreth has been a moderator on AskHistorians for three years, and has contributed hundreds of pages of content with regards to the ancient world. Celebreth?

Link to Cele's Paper with edits:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9nqQulCLkiZMXlzV3lkX044V3c/view?usp=sharing

---

My name is Margaret, and I work in the field of Remembrance and Commemoration. Specifically I work with how spaces are negotiated and contested, which is remarkably helpful when thinking about the internet.

It's not a huge statement to say that the humanities has "recognised" the potential of new media. But we all know that creating a space where we can provide good content is only one half of the equation. We also need an audience. So this presentation is going to focus on creating, moulding, and allowing an audience to interact with our information, and letting that audience talk to each other, in a specific space.

If there is one thing to take away from my presentation - if you don't listen to another single thing I say - then let that thing be this. Diffusing good information in the digital humanities is not just about being the very best at creating information. There is no point in having the slickest website to present it, or having awesome links, if there isn't a community - because they are the audience who will appreciate your work. And who will share it.

The online humanities need to get really good at creating and maintaining these communities – and becoming comfortable with their natural lifespan. Growing audiences from scratch isn't easy, and nor is curating communities, and nor is letting them fracture and die, but communities are the key to disseminating information. This comes with the caveat that so-called learning communities are true as long as certain key cultural values are in place: curiosity, creativity, and tolerance – but especially important to the pursuit of pure knowledge is curiosity.

So; the eight thousand dollar question. How did Askhistorians do this? Because it did. It built not just a little, dedicated audience, but one consisting of a huge number of people - approximately a million subscribers. And those subscribers perform a culture of curiosity. So how did AskHistorians do it, and how might that translate to broader lessons in the humanities?

First I need to pause to talk a little about “a culture of curiosity”. A Culture of Curiosity. What is that? Well. I have followed Geertz, and define a culture as a repeating social practices among a group; in this case, it is one which encourages and rewards exploring sound knowledge for its own sake. It is driven from below as people perform these activities, and it self-regulates through social sanction. But it is also structured from above by seen or unseen constraints placed and refined by an overt hierarchy.

Don’t despair! These are cultures we can create. At the same time, we must acknowledge that these are cultures that people have to create for themselves. Actually, the hard part is allowing them to.

Okay, some of your might be wondering. Why do we have to allow them? Well. We do, because we recognise that the internet levels the playing field – even when it shouldn’t. Internet spaces make holding authority difficult. What do I mean by that? Bruce Lincoln at the University of Chicago describes holding authority as being able to make an act of speech which an audience accepts. You don’t need to persuade them or coerce them; they accept you have the right to speak and even if they don’t agree they’ll at least listen. However the internet is absent many of the traditional symbols which help indicate to an audience whose words should be trusted. Who does have the right to speak? Even those symbols which can be translated – for example, a PhD - lose much of their value. People can claim to be anyone; a kind of Schrodinger’s Historian. Everyone is both qualified and unqualified unless someone checks. There are several partial solutions to this dilemma but… ultimately it persists, no matter what the source or who you are. For one particularly crazy example Bruce Scates, the eminent Australian professor of the First World War, was challenged on his own Monash Open Online Course, with some commentators suggesting he was exaggerating the severity of the Great War to make a political point. One of the best ways to solve this problem then is to simply avoid it. Give members of the audience not only access to the quality information itself, but control over the process of finding it.

It sounds so easy when I say it like that. Sadly, it is not. Although it has consistently proven in practice to be one of the most effective methods of producing self-sustaining cultures of curiosity, it also brings its own challenges.

The most obvious of these challenges, and the one everyone is probably thinking loudly at me right now, is that curiosity is no guarantee of skill. Ensuring the process actually produces helpful results, without an expert taking overt control of that process, or that process being derailed by the loudest voices, is a major challenge. Most common is a process called “crowd-sourcing.” This entails asking a community of people to freely

provide answers from all their broad range of perspectives and then letting that same community decide which answers are better. It does mean everyone is engaged, everyone is involved in the knowledge creation, and hopefully the most convincing voices will win out. It's also incredibly simple to implement, albeit difficult to implement well.

Returning to our case study, AskHistorians does do this– people in the audience ask the questions, people in the audience provide the answers, and our crowd then rewards or punishes the participants.
But AskHistorians also provides a great example of why just allowing this freely is a terrible idea in the humanities. History is subjective. Crowd-sourcing can punish subaltern members of the audience – not only by silencing their answers, but by discouraging them from asking questions which might have unpopular answers. It also provides answers to questions in ways which might be self-serving. For example, the large majority of the users of AskHistorians are young men, predominately in computer sciences, below the age of 28, and from America. It is a joke among the mod-team of AskHistorians that it probably have the largest archives of random information about Hitler on the internet. Especially his moustache. On the other hand, the gender history of women tends to not be popular – perhaps not punished, but sidelined through lack of interest. There are few answers to this conundrum. Top-down community management might be appealing, but in practice can be difficult, time consuming, labour intensive, and above all ineffective. Although the AskHistorians mod team has tried several times to quietly promote things like gender history, there are no sanctions for users who avoid uncomfortable topics, and engagement can't really be forced. But silence can make people feel unwelcome. Limiting what students you attract necessarily limits the utility of your community.

So; is ceding control over these process of questions and answers actually helpful? People are learning things, but those things do not challenge them. And actually, asking a good question is really hard. As academics I think sometimes it is easy to forget how hard asking a good question really is. Questions themselves can embody assumptions and power structures which in an academic environment we could identify as problematic and reject. For example, AskHistorians often fields concerning questions about Africa. [MH1] The problem isn't how our members respond, but in how people are asking their questions.

This is compounded by how hard it is to establish that aforementioned authority on the internet. People just don't know you from a bar of soap. That is a real problem because the audience gets to decide who it will believe. The audience always does - online and

off. Without a legacy of legitimacy it becomes a difficult task to spontaneously persuade an audience that you have the right to speak.

So even as we must allow people to create a culture of curiosity, it behooves the makers to make sure that curiosity is productive. That's where we as historians must step in. And that moulding is top-down; a negotiation between we as speakers and that audience we desire to retain. There are a lot of strategies, which will be highly dependant on architecture of your space, but roughly, these fall under "carrots" and "sticks". In our case-study, the team behind AskHistorians can reward community leaders - those who consistently post good historical answers - and the AskHistorians team can punish those who are disruptive. These punishments range from removing particular speech or outright banning particular posters, and rewards can be as simple as giving good posters brightly coloured banners next to their names.

On the other hand, there are also a multitude of 'stick' techniques to minimise the harm of posters. These posters can be simply those that don't know what they're talking about, or users with more malign ambitions.

Now I have personally run MOOCs and other university engagement programmes where the sticks, especially, are held away from the tutor trying to teach. Although it is fundamentally more difficult to operate in this way, it is currently the norm for the IT department to have those controls, and not the academic actually shaping the audience. That will be the reality for most of you. So it is imperative to have a way for dominant community voices to be given at least a limited amount of real leadership, because it makes your job easier.

It is also important that people within the community know you're conducting these carrot and stick techniques, and that your activity is expected and accepted in that space. The crowd doesn't necessarily need to know every single deletion, but they do need to be warned that there are standards. You will know your moulding has been successful if after a while these standards become discursive – the audience expects high-quality answers, will provide answers to that standard, and will be scornful of those who clearly fall short. They will engage in your material in an effort to meet that standard – and that means everyone wins. In effect, the moderation is a part of the process of learning, and once the audience has learned that lesson, moderation can (theoretically at least) become less needed.

In practice, communities have a life-span. That can be fixed – like the length of a course – or it can be ongoing. But if it's ongoing then people need to be comfortable with the idea that your community is going to fight, split, and dwindle. All communities have a life-span, and internet communities demonstrate this faster than most. Even during the good times, the constant influx of new users means the moderation is also required to be constant.

Make no mistake; digital outreach history is a force-multiplier, not a cost-saver. The labour required to curate a community of learning is equal to, or perhaps even more than is required for traditional communities of learning - ie a classroom. Not enough labour will cripple your ability to mould the community. But too much intervention, and you will frighten folks away from contributing; it's that old artisotatlian problem of finding that perfect mean.

The second great uncomfortable truth is that the moderator, community manager, online lecturer, whatever you want to call it, will certainly face online harassment and bullying as part of the job. Even in closed communities with low levels of anonymity, the lack of immediate social sanction gives some people the confidence to behave badly. Actually, the creation of a comfortable community where people feel like they belong will bring other issues into the space as well; Venessa Peach, a digital community expert based in Melbourne Australia, argues that universities are well behind in the need to bring, for example, their self-harm reporting policies to their coursework. All of this can be rough on the person simply trying to provide good history.

Regardless, this brings me looping back to the central point of this paper. Digital history is about audiences, and setting in motion a process. If the audience performs a process that continually reengages them with the learning process, then they will stay and thrive, and help each other. That is no different to what we do off-line – what we are the best at doing off-line. The only difference is online, you can guide it, but they're in the driver's seat. In the long-term, I am not sure this isn't the great strength of the new approaches; the participants in these kinds of spaces learn the underpinning skills of our craft without even realising it. They learn to structure arguments. They learn to judge sources. They learn how questions are as important sometimes as where that answer goes. Because they can't necessarily filter what questions they see, their interest might be piqued by an area they have never considered. This strikes me as a considerable victory, when the numbers of people reached in this manner can number in the hundreds of thousands.

But now I'd like to cede the platform to cephalopodie, who will speak more on…

---

cephalopodie speech!

Moderation on internet forums can be a hotly contested topic. Many feel that the internet should be a space where complete and unquestioned free speech should be allowed to dominate. Although most forums have some sort of rules in place, it is pretty common for moderation to be minimal. There is a reason "don't read the comments" is the unspoken first rule of the internet. Though Reddit is known for being generally quite relaxed in its site-wide user conduct policies, individual subreddits get to decide their own rules. AskHistorians has a reputation for having one of the strictest moderation policies of any subreddit. This occasionally results in the moderators being decried as being "Literally Hitler," however for the most part we are as highly respected for our strict moderation as we are for the quality of our content. I want to talk a little bit about why we have the kinds of rules we do, how we implement them, and how our moderation informs the shape of our community.

The work of history is a serious business. History as a discipline has the capacity to both build up and tear down. Depriving marginalized groups of their history is perhaps the quietest and most effective way of maintaining that marginalization. Conversely, the practice of engaging with a truly inclusive history goes hand-in-hand with liberation. This adds an extra level of weight and consideration to our work that perhaps might not occur on a forum devoted to another subject. Our project is truly revolutionary in its capacity to open up the process of history to a wide audience. Because of this great potential we have a responsibility to make our project as inclusive as possible.

AskHistorians is ultimately a collaborative process. Each post is effectively a collaboration between the questioner and the respondent, the outcome of which is quite often greater than the sum of its parts. The broader shape of the project, including the moderation style, is also a collaborative effort, this time between the users and the moderators. As my colleagues have discussed, we make a point of letting our users guide our content. As moderators, we seek to foster good discussion and cooperation while as much as possible allowing our userbase to guide the shape and scope of the project. One of the most difficult aspects of our work as moderators is determining

when, how, and to what extent we should take a more active, top-down approach to shaping our community. We don't want to offer a prescriptive formula for participation in AskHistorians. We want our users to create with us, to push the boundaries of what we can be.

That being said, there are certain realities involved in moderating a largely anonymous online forum. Horrible people hiding behind a username to spread hate and discord is a very real reality of what we do. As mods we see all the removed comments and questions. Some of these are simply low-effort, poor quality answers, but others contain hate speech, oppressive language, or problematic frameworks. In general, Reddit has few prescriptive rules regarding conduct (although there have been some recent efforts to control the darker corners of the site.) As we have built this community we have made the conscious effort to create a policy of active moderation to ensure that, as much as possible, our users have a positive experience. There are certain structural barriers already in place – notably the requirements of computer access and English language comprehension – but there are many aspects of AskHistorians that we as moderators are able to tweak, control, and shape to create a more diverse and inclusive space. We have created a set of oftentimes very strict rules and policies that encourage positive behaviors, maintain user accountability, and when necessary remove content and users who fail to live up to our standards.

Enforcing these high standards is a tremendous amount of work. Beyond the simple act of removing problematic comments and banning rule-breaking users (which is actually not always that simple) we also spend a considerable amount of time fine-tuning and tweaking our rules and practices to better fit the needs of the community. We have had involved discussions about what sorts of questions result in good answers, and which ones bring forth a high number of low-quality answers. We regularly evaluate and discuss how our rules are working and how they can be improved to create a more respectful and functional community. This can be a rather painstaking process. Often these discussions can be lengthy and involved and a little frustrating. However, as mods we have a responsibility to this great community we've built. Our rules and policies are designed to both increase the quantity of good historical information and improve the qualitative experience of our users.

One of the biggest challenges we face is creating and maintaining a community that is both diverse and inclusive. For the purpose of this discussion I want to focus primarily on diversity of historical topics. Because of the nature of our project it is important that we have a diverse set of historical interests represented. This can fall along several

different lines: temporal/geographical, demographic categories like class, race, gender, and sexuality, as well as historical and historiographical subtypes. Whereas diversity is largely an issue of demographics, inclusion has more to do with practices and attitudes. We want to make sure that there are as few barriers as possible between our users and a really awesome and exciting historical experience. This means we want users to get a satisfying answer to their question: an answer that is in-depth, complex, and interesting, regardless of whether they're asking about the roman legion or the history of the wristwatch. Additionally we want to make sure that our space is devoid of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ableism. Although we cannot control every aspect of our users experience of AskHistorians, there is a lot we can do to make their experience one of enrichment, not oppression.

In regards to diversity, one of the perennial problems we face is under- and over-represented areas of study. Although we have a range of historical interests represented on AskHistorians, there are certain areas of study that tend to receive the most questions and the highest number of responses. As we operate on Reddit, our userbase corresponds fairly closely to that of Reddit. That is to say a large amount of our users are young, American men. Perhaps unsurprisingly we get a large number of questions regarding Western European political and military history. We have a large number of flaired users in the area of 20th century western military history, but comparatively fewer in non-western, social, and cultural fields. This means that folks who come to us seeking our knowledge in these under-represented fields often walk away disappointed and without an answer to their question. For people who study these areas it often means they get few questions about the subjects to which they've devoted so much time and passion. These users tend to spend less time on AskHistorians. Additionally, since we work on Reddit's system of upvoting and downvoting, it is easy to perpetuate a system that promotes already popular content.
This disparity between "popular" history, which often correlates with mainstream narratives and the history of privileged groups, and less represented fields is a significant hurdle in our project. We have made a conscious effort to recruit and support folks from less-represented fields. Moderators and flaired users with an underrepresented area of study take particular interest in seeking out others in similar and adjacent fields. We also occasionally facilitate the flair-ing process for folks with under-represented areas of study by specifically asking questions in those fields. Additionally we provide weekly threads on a variety of historical and historiographical themes, from light-hearted trivia threads to more serious discussions of historical methods. These provide a space for folks to talk about their areas of focus outside of the usual question-and-answer model. Although we have some success in working to

increase the prevalence and visability of these under-represented fields, we still struggle with the limitations of our demographics and the mechanics of Reddit. Questions and answers focusing on military and political history (not to mention the historical “accuracy” of Game of Thrones) continue to be the most popular and visible in our community.

Our ability to control our demographics is limited. What we do have significant control over, however, are our practices of inclusion. Creating an inclusive space is very much an active, ongoing practice. Beyond just striving towards an increased diversity of historical topics, we also enforce high standards of conduct amongst our users. Civility is our first rule at AskHistorians. This means we expect all users to treat each other in a polite and respectful way. People who fail to follow that rule, particularly those who engage in oppressive and/or offensive language, are banned from the community. Although reddit has no rules about what sort of user name a person uses, we do enforce an “offensive username” policy that forbids the use of racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist slurs in user names. The boundaries of this policy are frequently a matter of debate amongst mods, but we all agree that this policy is central to creating the kind of environment we want for AskHistorians.

We do receive a decent amount of pushback from users who are not accustomed to this kind of active moderation. That being said, the majority of users appreciate our strictness in enforcing our rules of conduct. Speaking as a woman on reddit, I can speak to the truly vital need for these policies. It is in no small part because of these policies that I am still engaged with AskHistorians, and that my participation in other subreddits is minimal. We cannot protect our users entirely from problematic or offensive content. What we can do is offer a degree of accountability that is rare in most other internet spaces.

I want to be clear that our work is far from over. There are still many opportunities to improve the scope and implementation of our project. That being said I am exceedingly proud of the work that we do at AskHistorians. We have made a conscious, ongoing effort to create a space where as many folks as possible can engage with the historical process as possible.

---

lngwstksgk speech:

The arm-chair history buff is a well-known trope, and often a negative one. It conjures images of a person who has read a few pop history books or websites and gained a confidence in their new knowledge that may outpace their degree of understanding. For a community digital outreach project such as AskHistorians, it is important to attract the right kind of expertise-the kind built from years of engagement and study. The moderation team of AskHistorians has found that true expertise can indeed be the result of self-study. By giving lay historians a place to share their expertise, the moderation team has found it can increase user engagement and add vibrancy to its community.

AskHistorians has developed its own means of determining expertise. On the internet, traditional markers such as degrees or institutional affiliations are difficult to verify and, in outreach, the most qualified person is not necessarily the person who can best engage an audience. Over time, we determined that the best policy needed to be two fold. Firstly, we look for demonstrated familiarity with primary and secondary sources in a given field and the ability to cite and engage with this material at a high level. Secondly, we look for a willingness and ability to engage with a diverse audience that often includes people with very little knowledge of history. We publically acknowledge people who can do both. Users who wish to have their expertise recognized gather three to five questions posed on the forum to which they have given an in-depth answer, drawing on multiple sources that are used critically to provide both information and analysis. Should they succeed in their application, they are awarded "flair," a coloured bar next to their username that denotes their area of expertise. Of the more than 300 flaired users on AskHistorians, we found that nearly 25% are self taught.

These self-taught lay historians in age from high school junior through graduate studies to established professionals in a variety of field who share a passion for history that has no other outlet. For some, history was a long-time love that had fallen by the wayside as they pursued a different career; for others, it is a new joy that entices them to further study. A survey of self-taught historians conducted for this presentation received 27 responses, of which two belonged to flaired users who had completed a formal history education to the Bachelor's or Master's level before leaving the field. While these experiences are not the focus of this paper, it is nonetheless interesting to note them. Two reported a difficulty in finding history-related jobs at their level of education and the third a reluctance to take on more student debt. For this group, AskHistorians

represents an outlet for their passion and accumulated knowledge and allows them to act as mentors and guides to self-taught historians. They are the glue between academics and the public. With their knowledge and experience both inside and outside of academia, they bridge the gap between the two worlds from within the community itself and help lay historians transition from one to the other.

Indeed, one theme that repeated through the survey responses was that of AskHistorians inspiring self-taught flaired users to apply for formal studies. In this way, well-done digital outreach can not only capture new students, but also draw professionals back to academia to pursue a new path. AskHistorians was obviously the catalyst for these stories, but they also represent an example of what can occur if you build community into your digital outreach, and engage the lay historian. This presentation will take a closer look at two of the respondants as particularly good examples of this theme. The first, Matt, discovered AskHistorians in early in his post-secondary education and the second, JaShong, when he was already a working professional with over a decade of experience.

Matt discovered AskHistorians just before beginning his freshman year at college, studying political science, having last taken a history class in his sophomore year of high school. AskHistorians provided an access point to historical concepts that are not typically taught to students outside the discipline, such as historiography and evaluating source bias, and allowed him to explore these concepts and apply them to his own work. He was also introduced to such resources as JSTOR and encouraged to explore his specific historical interests, which ultimately settled on numismatics in archaeology, the area in which he has flair. Knowledge of and access to resources beyond those available at the local public library allowed Matt to delve deeper into his interests and build a stronger theoretical foundation. Later, he was able to use questions he had answered on AskHistorians as the basis of a blog he maintains on money.org, the home of the Numismatist online, and later to have an article published in the same journal, appearing on the front page of the May 2015 issue.

By contrast, JaShong was already a professional in an established career as a photo editor with Reuters at the time he discovered AskHistorians. He hoped to grow a newfound interest in ancient history, which had been sparked by Mike Duncan's History of Rome podcast and quickly discovered a wealth of information at his disposal. He started by following forum threads related to his interests, which led him to refine those interests. As his knowledge increased, he began answering questions, and was

encouraged to go further in his reading. Discussions on the forum, notably on the regular feature of Theory Thursdays, introduced JaShong to the rigours of academia for the first time. In his own words, he saw the "dialogue of propositions, challenges, [and] counter challenges, in an attempt to come to an agreement upon understanding" which is the basis of the academic world. He later received flair in the area of the post-Roman transformation and joined our flair community. This year, he has enrolled in a Masters in Classics, focusing on late antiquity and the early Byzantine Empire, at the University of Ottawa.
In addition to Matt and JaShong, a remarkable five of twenty-seven respondents credit AskHistorians participation for their decision to pursue graduate studies in history or to consider applying. Two others credit it with influencing them to study history at the undergraduate level. One of these had previously dropped out of their degree program, only to be re-inspired to study in this new field.

In other words, one-third of lay historians responding to the survey believe that digital outreach was integral to their educational decisions as they relate to history, but they did not get to this level of engagement by simply responding to questions on the forum. Instead, it was the network of flaired users that AskHistorians built which has been key to drawing lay historians into a deeper love of the field.

It is the construction of a community which sustains engagement, just like in the traditional academy. In our case, flaired users are invited to join a private subreddit. This was initially intended as a staging ground for live group question and answer sessions, which, in Reddit parlance, are called AMAs, but it quickly became more than that. Beyond the 25% self-taught historians, many of our flaired users are graduate students at the masters or doctoral levels, adjuncts, tenured professors, and even emeritus scholars. This private forum became an area in which everyone could mix freely. As participation grew, friendships and mentoring relationships formed between the more traditional academics and those earlier in their studies or who were taking non-traditional routes back into study. Even as the lay historians helped to energize the community base by understanding the language to use and what the average person might find interesting, these same flaired users also found that the AskHistorians community allowed them to bridge the gap between themselves and historical Academia.

Of course, it remains entirely possible to head down to the local library to consult the librarian and check out appropriate books, but traditional means such as this have their limitations, particularly for those not lucky enough to have access to a university library. Most municipal libraries are ill-equipped to deal with in-depth questions on the Late Byzantine Empire or to delve into numismatics in archaeology. University libraries, in addition to simply being inaccessible to some segments of the population, may also be too intimidating for teenagers still in high school or adults who have had no previous contact with post-secondary institutions. Communities such as AskHistorians and the creation of an Internet-based community network level that field, providing a safe and anonymous place in which to enquire about resources or even base knowledge. Particularly in popular fields like Rome and the Byzantine Empire, users such as JaShong are able to tap into a wellspring of undergraduate and graduate students who are intimately familiar with the state of the field and current historiographical debates.

This sharing of expertise among flaired users parallels the sharing of expertise found in AskHistorians proper, and it provides a richness to community-based outreach which cannot be found in something static like a website. Where AskHistorians facilitates the sharing of expertise with a lay or semi-educated audience, the flaired users subreddit goes further by encouraging flaired users to develop friendships and mentorships with other users, thus creating a network of knowledge that serves to strengthen the AskHistorians community. Four survey respondents who did not choose to pursue former studies also spoke to the way the community encouraged them to re-engage with their sources and delve deeper into the context of their studies. Twenty-five percent use AskHistorians in their daily lives to expand their understanding of history and extend the reach of their knowledge.

Through strong moderation policies addressed earlier in this panel and by creating a network of expertise among its flaired users, AskHistorians has succeeded in creating a community; a unique platform of history outreach that shows a promising ability to draw lay historians into a deeper examination of the historical field and to spur previously uninterested individuals to explore parts of history they had never encountered. Such a community can have strong impacts, inspiring a lay audience not only to see history as a proper discipline, but also to consider it a career path they could follow.