



Reddit Submission to Ofcom Call for Input “Media Literacy by Design”

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Executive Summary

1. When it comes to online platforms, the structural design of a service is the foundational step in promoting genuine “media literacy *by design*.” More than top-down interventions that are layered over the essential and perhaps unchangeable platform characteristics, *the core design of a service* is what most effectively guides user behaviour with regard to how content is consumed and thus the platform’s overall media environment. Ofcom should therefore have regard to structure and design, in addition to layered interventions, in its assessment of best practices.
2. Harnessing the wisdom of crowds is a longstanding, empirically-supported, and strikingly democratic approach to surfacing and promoting accurate information. Reddit makes use of this evidence-based principle via its user voting system. Furthermore, the accuracy of a crowd-based approach has been shown to be further enhanced by deliberative interactions amongst the collective individuals making the judgments, such as the kind that Reddit facilitates. It is thus important that Ofcom give due consideration to this research-backed, democratically-driven means of curating a media-literate community grounded in critical thinking.
3. Community norms can be more psychologically powerful than top-down interventions and may therefore be more effective in encouraging behaviours that foster an environment of media literacy. Ofcom should acknowledge this important role of community culture and associated behavioural norms in the promotion of “media literacy by design” and endorse solutions that strengthen the normative power of communities.

Introduction

Reddit welcomes this opportunity to share its views in response to Ofcom’s call for input on the topic of “media literacy by design.” “*The heart of the internet*,” Reddit is a democratic, community-governed system of thousands of independent subreddits where people can dive into discussions about their interests, according to community-specific rules they’ve written themselves (while respecting the bounds of the sitewide Content Policy)¹, and enforced largely through the work of both volunteer community leaders (known as moderators) and the votes of community members at large. This distributed, community-based system is unique in the industry

¹ *Reddit Content Policy*, available at <https://www.redditinc.com/policies/content-policy>.



and has been independently demonstrated to be highly effective in empowering users to critically judge information and ensure the promotion of high quality content (and conversely, the demotion of low quality content). By design, it does this organically and with a level of scale and communal credibility that is not feasible for top-down, centralised interventions.² We are therefore pleased to offer information and reflections on how the Reddit system works, with the hope that Ofcom's recommendations and best practices have room to account for designs that specifically harness the wisdom and power of communities.

Service Structure & Design Promotes Media Literacy

The structural design of a service is the foundational step in promoting genuine “media literacy *by design*.” It is the primary determinant for how users interact with each other and with the content they encounter. More than top-down interventions – such as platform-appended labels or manual content demotions – that are layered over the essential and perhaps unchangeable platform characteristics, *the core design of a service* is what most effectively guides user behaviour with regard to how content is consumed, analysed, shared, and amplified (or not).

While Reddit does from time to time make use of certain aspects of the “best practice principles for on-platform interventions” discussed in the consultation document of this Call for Input,³ in our experience, such interventions do not scale to the same degree as the inherent design and characteristics of the Reddit community model itself, in which users and volunteer moderators are at the centre of the platform's commitment to not just promote media literacy, but ensure it is an integral part of the Reddit experience. This supposition is supported by external observers, such as Kitchens, Johnson, and Gray, who in their findings that Reddit users enjoy a more diverse and less partisan news environment than the users of centralised platforms, noted that “the underlying characteristics of platforms may each uniquely shape information consumption.”⁴ Reddit therefore submits that Ofcom has regard to structure and design, in addition to layered interventions, in its assessment of best practices and platforms' efforts to encourage media literacy.

² See Vincent Mazzaro, “The Federalists of the Internet? What Online Platforms Can Learn from Reddit's Decentralized Content Moderation Scheme,” *Nebraska Law Review* (January 2023). Available at https://lawreview.unl.edu/federalists-internet-what-online-platforms-can-learn-reddit%E2%80%99s-decentralized-content-moderation#_edn1.

³ See, for example, Reddit's “Quarantine” function. “Quarantined Subreddits,” *RedditHelp*, available at <https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043069012>.

⁴ Brent Kitchens, Steven L. Johnson, and Peter Gray, “Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: the Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts In News Consumption,” *MIS Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (December 2020): 1640. Available at https://www.darden.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/05_16371_RA_KitchensJohnsonGray%20Final_0.pdf.



Democratic Model Harnesses the “Wisdom of Crowds” Effect & Fosters Critical Thinking

Reddit is intrinsically democratic. This emphasis on peer-to-peer interaction builds trust among users, which leads to healthier content experiences. It also requires users to consider the quality of their and others’ contributions. Users join communities (known as “subreddits”) where they can post, vote on, and debate content. Through this discursive system featuring upvoting and downvoting – where the former increases content visibility and the latter diminishes it – users are making judgments about posts that are relevant to their interests and areas of knowledge, and often sharing the reasoning behind those judgments in the comments section. These signals determine the reach of a particular post. To participate in this activity, Reddit users and moderators must think critically about content. Individually and collectively, they are making democratic interventions that ultimately shape the platform.

Harnessing the wisdom of crowds in this way has a strong and storied empirical backing. British statistician Francis Galton noted it in his classic 1907 publication, “Vox Populi,” in which he observed the uncanny accuracy of the median guesses of 787 fairgoers in supposing the weight of an ox.⁵ Building on Galton’s work more than a hundred years later, Joaquin Navajas and others demonstrated that crowds, when able to deliberate with each other, are even more accurate.^{6,7} In recent years, the US government has partnered with preeminent political scientists to harness this principle for such serious business as improving the CIA’s forecasting capability.⁸

Reddit, by design, takes advantage of this “wisdom of deliberating crowds” phenomenon inherently through its voting system and discursive comment threading. The result, as evidenced by independent research, is highly effective. For example, a recent study from The Ohio State University that examined Reddit’s community model in mitigating the spread of disinformation found it to be superior as compared to other platforms.⁹ As the study’s authors said: “Reddit is a

⁵ Francis Galton, “Vox Populi,” *Nature* 75, no. 1949 (7 March 1907): 450-1. Available from <https://www.nature.com/articles/075450a0.pdf>.

⁶ Joaquin Navajas et al, “Aggregated Knowledge from a Small Number of Debates Outperforms the Wisdom of Large Crowds,” *Nature Human Behavior* 2 (February 2018): 126-132. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0273-4>.

⁷ For a simple summary of both Galton’s and Navajas’s works, see Tania Lombrozo, “No Man Is An Island: The Wisdom Of Deliberating Crowds,” NPR, 12 March 2018. Available from <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2018/03/12/592868569/no-man-is-an-island-the-wisdom-of-deliberating-crowds>.

⁸ Alix Spiegel, “So You Think You’re Smarter than a CIA Agent,” *Morning Edition*, NPR, 2 April 2014. Available from <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/04/02/297839429/-so-you-think-youre-smarter-than-a-cia-agent>.

⁹ Robert Bond and R. Kelly Garrett, “Engagement with fact-checked posts on Reddit,” *PNAS Nexus* 3, issue 3 (March 2023) 1-9. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad018>.



community that has watchdogs, both the moderators and other users. They often look for untrue information and correct it, and the community is responsive to those corrections.”¹⁰

Additionally, when users post content that other users upvote and appreciate, their Reddit “karma” score – a public marker of reputation – improves, signalling to other users their reliability.¹¹ Conversely, if users post content that is consistently downvoted, their karma score will decrease, and a low enough karma score may result in moderators limiting them from participation in certain forums. Karma scores thus help to provide context about the poster, allowing Reddit users and moderators a quick way to scrutinise the source of any post or comment. According to scholars Graham and Rodriguez, Reddit karma is “a positive evaluation that incentivises and normalises particular practices through gaming yet disciplinary means.”¹²

Cumulatively, the incentive (and evidence backing it) is clear: share content that will be of value to people with similar interests, and the community will on the whole accurately assess it. Reddit believes that Ofcom could consider such democratic participation and peer-to-peer content evaluation in its study of media literacy incentives across the sector; the downstream impact of this model is often more effective than top-down actions that may not carry the same earned credibility.

Community Culture Drives “Media Literacy by Design”

As Reddit is entirely animated by its communities, so too has the culture and etiquette of Reddit been developed by its community members (known as “redditors”). “Reddiquette” is “an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves.”¹³ Indeed, it even pre-dates the site’s Content Policy¹⁴ (which it now complements) as the Reddit community’s first attempt at written norms of self-governance. Numerous points of Reddiquette spur the promotion of media literacy on the platform. For example, it encourages moderation based on quality, not opinion; it urges users to keep submission titles factual and opinion free; and it also asks users to link to the original sources of the content they refer to in their posts. These are just some of the expectations that Reddit users have developed for each other.

¹⁰ Jeff Grabmeier, “True Stories Can Win Out on Social Media, Study Finds,” Ohio State News, 2 Feb. 2023, available at <https://news.osu.edu/true-stories-can-win-out-on-social-media-study-finds/>.

¹¹ “What is Karma?” *RedditHelp*, available at <https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/204511829-What-is-karma->.

¹² Timothy Graham and Aleesha Rodriguez, “The Sociomateriality of Rating and Ranking Devices on Social Media: A Case Study of Reddit’s Voting Practices,” *Social Media + Society* 7, issue 3 (July-September 2021). Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211047667>.

¹³ “Reddiquette,” *RedditHelp*, available at <https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/205926439>.

¹⁴ *Reddit Content Policy*, available at <https://www.redditinc.com/policies/content-policy>.



Individual community rules, as written independently by volunteer moderators, also encourage media literacy in a way that is tailored to the topic of each subreddit. For example, Reddit's premier science community, r/science, only allows users to post links to "published peer-reviewed research," and explicitly forbids "editorialized, sensationalized, or biased titles."¹⁵ The r/news community, for its part, forbids links to articles from sources that are considered by the community to be "unreliable," which they judge to include "tabloids, Tweets, self-posts...[and] satire websites."¹⁶ This rule inherently forces the community at large to scrutinise and evaluate sources before they post, lest their post be downvoted by the community or removed by the moderators, potentially resulting in consequences for their karma scores or even a ban from the community.

The behaviours fostered by Reddiquette and individual subreddit rules speak directly to the goal of seeding media literacy by design through the establishment of healthy cultural norms around critical thinking. Psychological research supports the notion that these norms, because of their social, peer-to-peer nature, may have more influence and longevity than top-down interventions designed by the company.¹⁷ Ofcom could therefore acknowledge the role of platform culture and the associated behavioural norms in the promotion of "media literacy by design."

Conclusion: Reddit Welcomes Flexible and Outcome-Oriented Recommendations

Reddit is aware that its structure and approach to content moderation are somewhat unusual. Most other platforms, particularly very large social media services, have adopted a centralised approach which, in turn, can often place more emphasis on top-down interventions to address challenges around user behaviour and harmful content. And while Reddit does deploy some interventions to assist users in making informed decisions about content consumption, the user's expression of interests and their subsequent social acceptance within relevant communities are generally more consequential to their experience than company-driven interventions.

We therefore welcome Ofcom's framing of the recommendations in the associated documentation as principles-based, outcome-oriented, and optional, leaving room for innovation and heterogeneity in platforms' approaches, particularly in terms of the more systemic, holistic approaches such as those applied by Reddit. Reddit is therefore naturally concerned about regulatory effects that might hamper our alternative model – a mandate to implement specific interventions may disrupt the organic operation of the platform, frustrate user trust and autonomy, and be less effective than current measures. In this sense, the flexibility and optionality built into the recommendations is appreciated and should be maintained.

¹⁵ Rule No. 1, "Submission Rules," r/science, <https://www.reddit.com/r/science/> (see sidebar).

¹⁶ Rule No. 6, "Submission Rules," r/news, <https://www.reddit.com/r/news/wiki/rules>.

¹⁷ Ben Wasike, "You've Been Fact-Checked! Examining the Effectiveness of Social Media Fact-Checking against the Spread of Misinformation," *Telematics and Informatics Reports* 11 (September 2023). Available from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772503023000506>.