

what is reddit?

**a guide for
marketing communications and
public relations professionals**

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This study examines the website reddit.com with the hopes of providing information about this community to marketing and communications professionals.

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reddit could arguably be one of the most mysterious of social networks for marketing and impression management professionals, due to the combination of the website's popularity, the culture of the community of users, and the minimal official information from reddit as a company that would help to accurately inform marketing and communications professionals of this culture.

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In order to provide context on the culture of reddit, the study finds broad trends based upon data gathered from the ten most popular submitted items during a ten-day period. Specifically, this study finds that users of reddit—often called redditors—enjoy a diversity of content and discussion of this content. While humorous and image-based content are some of the most popular types of material that appears on the front page of reddit, other news- and discussion-based content is also quite popular among users. While some of these users chose user names that appear to be humorous or irreverent, this does not necessarily mean that these users only post humorous or ridiculous content.

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Because of the diversity of content found on reddit, marketing and communications professionals interested in exploring reddit as an approach to managing image of their brand's products or services may want to further familiarize themselves with the website. These professionals may want to explore unique communities of the website in order to conduct research on prospective customers or stakeholders, before developing advertising or impression management strategy involving reddit. Additional research that focuses upon the trends of subreddits could be of interest to marketers and public relations professionals representing particular industries.

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Context

Reddit (the lower-case “r” is intentional) is a website that hums with links to content that is submitted by users. These users, or redditors, submit content for review by other users, who then upvote or downvote these submissions. Each item also welcomes users to comment upon any aspect of the content of the submission (“About”).

Only registered users can vote on these submissions, but any Internet user can view submissions that have been posted to reddit. Upon first access of the homepage—also known as the front page—a visitor will see the most popular content of a given moment that has been sourced from fifty default different and popular subreddits, or specific communities of content (“Reddit”). Nearly 7,000 subreddits were active in the past month (“About”).

What appears on the front page is based upon an algorithm that takes into account the number of upvotes to downvotes, plus the time that has passed since a user posted the content (Springer).

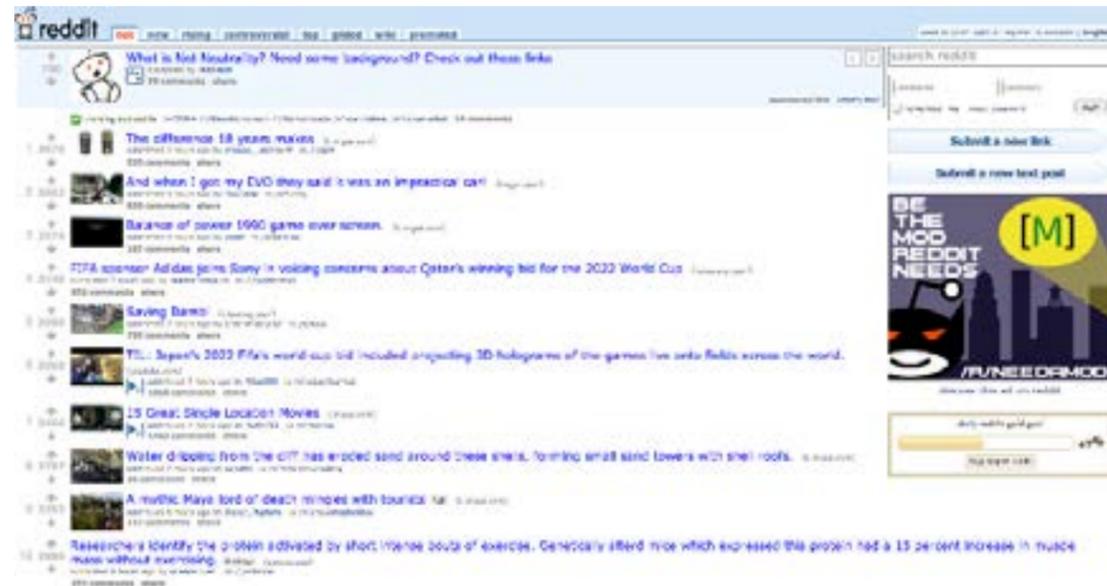


Fig. 1. reddit front page, 8 June 2014.

*2,967,257 users
logged in to reddit
between May 4
and June 3, 2014*

Registered users can subscribe to different subreddits in order to read fresh content on topics of interest to them. If a submission from a unique subreddit receives a substantial amount of upvotes to downvotes in a short amount of time, compared to other submissions, these submissions from less-well-known subreddits will likely appear on the front page visible to them upon login (“Frequently Asked Questions”).

As if the number of subreddits were an indication, reddit attracts a large number of users and visitors. Between May 4 and June 3, a total of 2,967,257 users logged in to reddit; during the same time frame, 113,479,741 unique visitors visited the site (“About”).

The site’s “About” page defines reddit as both a noun and a verb, “a type of online community where users vote on content” in the case of the former and “to take part in a reddit community” for the latter. As it seems, according to reddit’s “About” page, the posting of content, voting on content, and discussion of content are central to reddit, serving as actions of a community.

This aspect of community is what differentiates reddit from other aggregator websites, argues tech journalist Farhad Manjoo: “What’s different about Reddit is that it’s a real, vibrant community, one of the few big websites where the users have constructed an unmistakable moral and political philosophy.”

Specifically, Manjoo claims that this community encompasses a handful of collective characteristics: “Redditors are lefties who have a soft spot for Ron Paul, they’re taken with atheism and the legalization of marijuana, they hate political interference with the Internet, they love Stephen Colbert, and they’re gaga for animated GIFs.”

Development of Study

While I initially hesitated to fully believe Manjoo's characterization, I suspected that most redditors fell into a certain demographic: male, between the ages of 25 and 34, and likely accessing the website from the United States ("Reddit"). Also, as an admitted reddit lurker who typically frequents the more humorous subreddits, I have developed a semblance of an understanding of the culture of reddit. Indeed, at the onset of this study, I hypothesized that animated gifs are quite popular on reddit, and that humorous content would dominate.

As I designed this study, I also knew marketing and communications professionals approaching this booming Internet community for may be confused as to how to interact with the website and its users. They may discover through an Internet search, for example, that a product or service offered by their company is being misrepresented or skewered in a discussion taking place in the comments of a submission to reddit. Similar Internet research may find redditors articulating a need for a particular product or service, thus illuminating a marketing opportunity. What steps these professionals must take to pursue these issues and opportunities, however, may not be clear.

The community of redditors is notoriously resistant to obvious marketing ploys (Pathak), and this apparent resistance to traditional marketing approaches that normally take place in social settings—such as embedding a promotional item within a feed

Many of the existing resources do not often address the larger complexities of reddit.

of content—is a considerable contrast to the relative ease of developing social strategy on other sites, due in part to the assistance provided by other social network companies. While reddit does sell advertising on its website ("reddit advertising"), both Facebook and Twitter feature significantly more robust information and opportunities for businesses on their company websites ("Twitter basics", "Facebook for Business").

Marketing communications and public relations professionals who engage in impression management activity—also known as the "fundamental interpersonal process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them" (Leary and Kowalski, cited in Lillqvist and Louhiala-Salminen 6)—of a particular brand are thus put in a peculiar position with reddit. They must contend with perhaps negative publicity or rampant misinformation about a product or service of their organization, but they may not have knowledge or resources available from reddit as an organization to help to address these concerns. While some media-focused blogs and websites do offer information for marketing communications professionals about how to navigate reddit (Mashable.com being a notable example), much of this content does not necessarily address the larger cultural complexities of reddit, and some—as exemplified by Manjoo's article—tend to stereotype redditors as a community.

To provide data and offer an alternative perspective to this discussion, I've taken a sample of the front page of reddit to provide an overview of what type of content typically appears, what sort of conversations occur about this content, and how marketing and communications professionals can operate within this space.



Fig. 2. From the reddit front page, 8 June 2014.

At approximately 12 p.m. for 10 days between Wednesday, May 7 and Saturday, May 17, 2014, I took screenshots of the front page of reddit to capture information on the top ten submissions at that time. In addition, I took screenshots of different moments in the comment section for each of these top ten submissions.

I collected data in nine categories on these top submissions. This data are the primary features of a submission to reddit, much of which is visible to a user viewing the post from the front page.

During the process of data collection, I was not logged in to the website, so what I found on the front page was the same as what other non-logged-in users would see at the same time. As noted earlier, a logged-in user who is subscribed to different subreddits will see top submissions from these subreddits, not only the submissions from the default subreddits which appear to users who are not logged in ("Frequently Asked Questions").

These data points are the primary features of a post on reddit.

The data points I collected include:

- Title of post
- Username
- Type of post (medium: image, text-based article, video, gif, etc.)
- Subreddit name
- Subreddit category: educational (news, science, TIL, etc.), entertainment (gaming, movies, etc.) discussion-based subreddits (IAMA, etc.) humor and image sharing subreddits (AdviceAnimals, Gifs, etc.)
- Corresponding Image (Yes or No)
- Number of of comments
- Type of discussion had within comments
- Score

I made several noteworthy observances during the analysis of my data, but marketing and communications professionals may be most interested in three distinct observed trends:

- **reddit fosters diversity of content**
- **reddit users engage with content in different ways**
- **reddit as a community thrives of discussion**

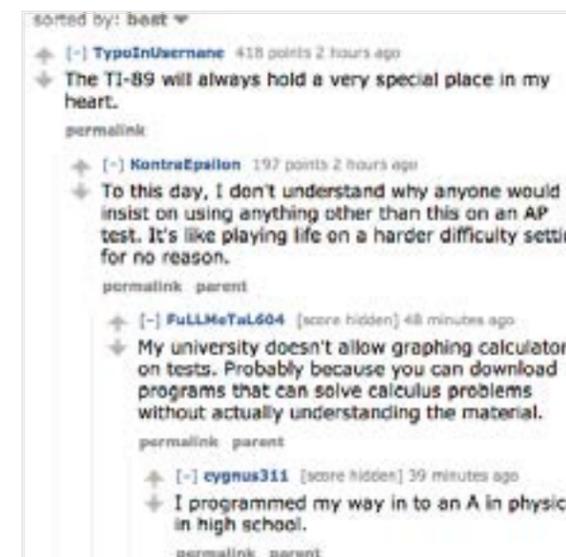


Fig. 3. From the comments on a submission to the reddit front page, 8 June 2014.



Fig. 4. From the front page of reddit, 10 June 2014.

Results, cont.

reddit fosters diversity of content

The top subreddits for submission observed during the data collection period include r/funny (10), followed by r/pics (9), r/gifs (8), and r/news, r/todayilearned, and r/mildlyinteresting (7 posts each). Several other subreddits were represented between two and six times over the data collection period. Some subreddit categories contained only one post over the data collection period: r/food, r/GetMotivated, r/books, r/photoshopbattles, r/NotTheOnion, and r/dataisbeautiful. However, this is only a small representation of all the subreddits in existence on reddit. As noted earlier, approximately 7,000 subreddits exist (“About”).

This data shows that while humorous posts placed in the r/funny subreddit are quite popular, other information-based subreddits—such as r/news and r/todayilearned—are collectively more popular.

A majority of the submissions in terms of medium were primarily an image (42 percent over the course of the research), followed by text-based submissions, such as articles or IAMAs (30 percent). Videos, graphs, gifs, and hybrid posts (meaning images that contained significant amounts of text) made up less than 25 percent of posts.

While humorous posts placed in the r/funny subreddit are popular, other information-based subreddits—such as r/news and r/todayilearned—are collectively more popular.

Type of post

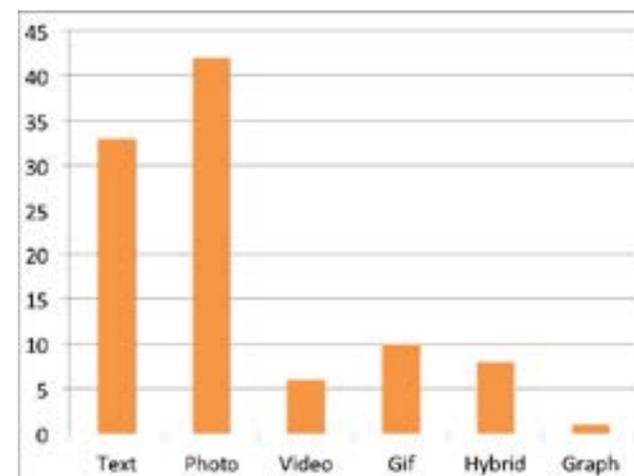


Fig. 5. Number of types of submissions, by medium, that appeared during study.

This data shows that while images are clearly important to redditors, text-based posts also have the opportunity to be popular, as compared to other mediums.

While text-based submissions were notably common, several of these text-based submissions, such as articles, usually involved at least one image. r/iAmAs and r/showerthoughts posts were the only subreddit categories to have posts that didn't contain an image as part of the content associated with the submission.

This observation, that there is an interest in readers of any text-based content to have visuals accompanying the copy, may resonate beyond the context of reddit.

Top subreddits, based on number of posts

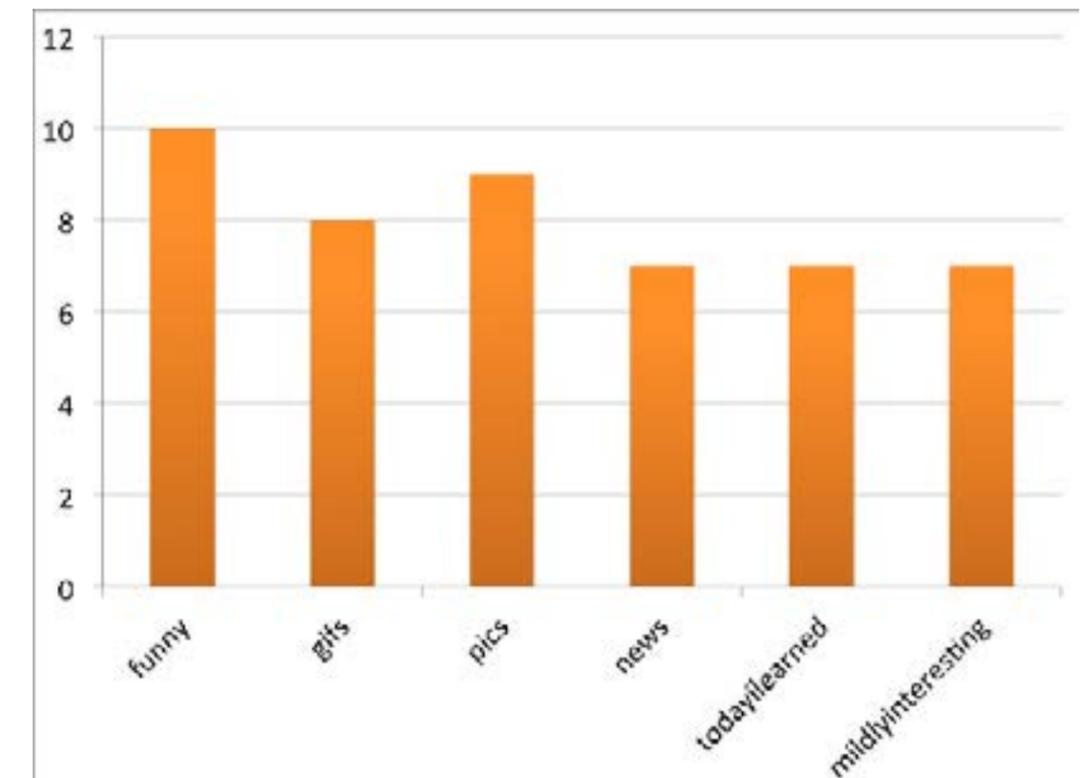


Fig. 6. Number of top subreddits that appeared during study.

Results, cont.

reddit users engage with content in different ways

As the table of usernames of the top submissions during the data collection period shows, reddit users--often called redditors--give themselves monikers of all varieties: some very funny, some absolutely ridiculous, some interesting, some plainly nondescript.

Celebrities observed interacting with redditors during the data collection period, such as Kevin Smith on May 7 and Will Ferrell on May 16, identify themselves by using their actual name. However, some redditors who I do not believe to be celebrities also identify by what may be their own names: ethan_kahn, Matt_Ron, mr_stevetighe. If these usernames are in fact the actual names of these users, this suggests that not all redditors chose to remain anonymous in a space that appears to welcome such a fluid identity.

While the data shows that a majority of redditors do adopt usernames that are different than their own, actual name, there is not necessarily a correlation between the type of username of a redditor and the content of his or her post.

Of course, some redditors posts relate to their username. For example, reddit user "CaptainOfCats" posted on May 17 an image titled "Whenever we set up a prayer rug my cat always likes to climb under it," linking to a photograph that included a cat.

May 7	May 8	May 9	May 10	May 12	May 13	May 14	May 15	May 16	May 17
ThatKevin-Smith	vernetroyer	gynocolo-guy	Osbaston	obviously_not_a_fish	reddit	KevlarYarmulke	carlinha1289	powerzjim	SwitchBlayd

Table 1. Usernames of the top submissions identified during study, organized by day.



Fig. 7. From the reddit front page, 12 May 2014.

However, a humorous name does not ensure that the redditor uses the website for humorous purposes.

For example, on May 8, user fallingoutthewindow--a quirky username that is not entirely appropriate for professional settings--posted a link titled "69 years ago today," which brought users to a gif of a historical video of a swastika exploding, in commemoration of the 69th anniversary of the Nazi surrender in 1945. Similarly, on May 12, user SWAPPIN_HERPEES posted a link to a video of a blind dog playing fetch, taught to do so by his owners. The gravity of the content of the first post and the heartwarming nature of the second post do not necessarily correlate with the degree of ridiculousness of these usernames.

In general, the irreverence in tone of a given username may not actually correspond to the user posting humorous or silly links. Not all redditors chose to be anonymous, and based upon the content of posts (and to echo the earlier section), redditors appear to be interested in a diverse variety of content—not only those that address Stephen Colbert and Ron Paul or contain gifs.

Results, cont.

reddit thrives of discussion

What is perhaps the most striking finding of this report is in part based upon the number of comments each submission has the potential to receive. The average of the data collection period is 751.24. Some submissions certainly received much fewer, but those that were more controversial or discussion-based received considerably more. For example: On May 13, an image of a cat with a mustache-pattern of fur that appeared similar to that of the lead character of the popular television series "Breaking Bad" was linked in a submission titled "This is Walter, he runs things around these parts." received 130 comments, while a submission of an image from the set of the upcoming Batman series received 2,587 comments.

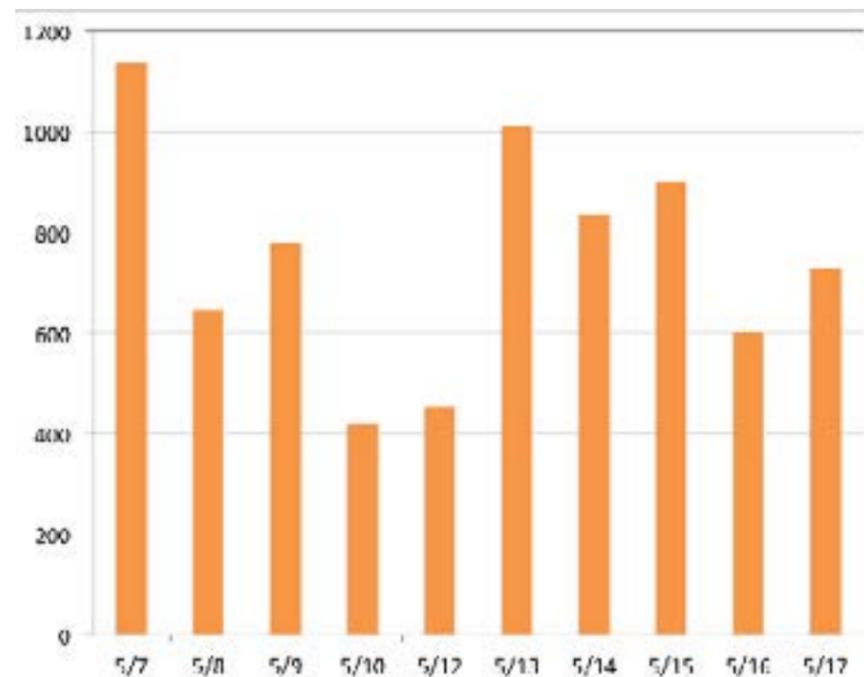


Fig. 8. Average number of comments per day of study

The average number of comments per post is 751.24

Of course, the number of comments a submission has the potential to receive depends upon its appearance on the front page, which is determined by its time since submission and the number of upvotes; if a post has more visibility by being on the front page, it follows that it will receive more comments. However, the number of comments illustrates that reddit is not simply a place where the content of links is not merely observed but is also engaged with by users.

The types of comments depend upon the content of the post, but the comments that transpired over the course of the data collection period contained humorous sparring, argument, links to other content, questions and responses, additional context to the post, and several more types of interaction. The tenor of some of these comment-based interactions did not always correspond with the tone of the content of the actual submission.



Fig. 9. A discussion in the comments section of a submission, 13 May 2014.

Recommendations

As has been found in this report, a tremendous amount of diversity of content is found on the front page of reddit. Politically-minded posts, celebrity discussions, humorous images, historical film, some with relatively few to many comments, all rising to the top of the front page within a few hours of initial submission, were observed over the course of this data collection period.

Different users engage with reddit in a variety of ways. However, the stereotypical reddit user—one who has a “soft spot for Ron Paul, they’re taken with atheism and the legalization of marijuana, they hate political interference with the Internet, they love Stephen Colbert, and they’re gaga for animated GIFs,” as characterized by Manjoo—is not necessarily accurate. In fact, it is difficult to characterize the typical reddit user based upon the posts that were observed over the course of this study. redditors seem to enjoy humorous content, and many have irreverent usernames, but many also enjoy and engage in discussion based upon news and information of many varieties.

Given the diversity of content appearing on the front page, the niche submissions and discussions that likely occur on subreddits—all 7,000 of them—make these spaces interesting

There isn't necessarily a stereotypical reddit user.

A marketer or public relations professional, then, may find more success in focusing upon a particular subreddit rather than making attempts at engaging with the activity that typically occurs on the front page.

sites to study, from not only an academic perspective but also from an approach of market research and impression management. A marketer or public relations professional, then, may find more success in focusing upon a particular subreddit rather than making attempts at engaging with the activity that typically occurs on the front page. For example, a public affairs professional working for a state or federal agency may monitor any news that may be posted on a subreddit relevant to his or her industry or field and engage in discussion in the comments in order to correct misinformation or invite users to contact the agency for continued discussion or resolution of an issue. Similarly, a marketer for a retailer may similarly observe trends that take place regarding products that are discussed on subreddits relevant to his or her category of stores, and use any insight gathered through this process to inform marketing strategy at product or company levels.

While this study focused on the front page of reddit, additional studies could focus a similar methodology on more niche subreddits. This type of research could provide more relevant information to marketing and communications professionals with interests in a particular industry.

Conclusion

Reddit is a considerably discussion-heavy social network, encompassing a variety of different types of posts and topics.

Therefore, those involved in impression management, branding, and/or promotion of different products and services who are interested in tapping into the community of reddit as a potential market may want to proceed with caution. A considerable amount of posting and discussion activity, across many topics, occurs on reddit on any given day, as this report demonstrates. It may be wise for marketers and public relations professionals interested in reddit to observe certain subreddits relevant to their industry, rather than simply study the diverse front page of reddit, before determining strategies for interacting with prospective or current customers or stakeholders.

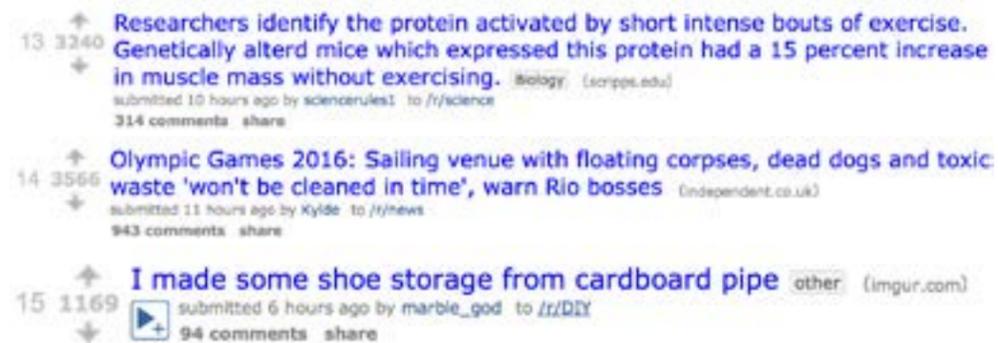


Fig. 10. Submissions appearing on the front page of reddit, 8 June 2014.

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