Do You Trust Answers?: Credibility Judgments in Social Search Using Social Q&A Sites

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ABSTRACT
People are increasingly using social question and answer (Q&A) sites as a source of information. Asking a question on a social Q&A site is a form of social search, as it enables the site’s users to find information by utilizing social resources through interactions with other people. In social Q&A settings, people interact with online content created by other users, and also with unknown people. As a result, individuals encounter challenges in making credibility judgments. Therefore, it is important to understand how people make credibility judgments when asking and answering questions within social Q&A settings. In this paper, we first present an overview of related work regarding social Q&A, social search, and credibility assessment in social Q&A settings. This review indicates the necessity of investigating how people trust answers when using social Q&A sites. We propose a conceptual framework for examining this problem within the context of social search.

Author Keywords
Social Q&A; Social search; Credibility; Trust; Information seeking.

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation: Miscellaneous.

General Terms
Human Factors.

INTRODUCTION
The act of asking questions of other people is a common information activity in which most people regularly engage. In the past, interactions in the process of questioning and answering tended to take place between limited numbers of individuals. However, the introduction of various social media tools and services has allowed people to easily reach out to an expanded base of distributed others when seeking information in everyday life settings. In particular, the introduction of social question and answer (Q&A) sites has expanded these interactions, dramatically changing the way people seek information from others. Today, interactions take place online between an individual questioner and a large group of mostly unknown individual answerers, adding greater complexity to the information seeking process.

Social Q&A sites enable people to meet their information needs by asking questions and receiving answers on a broad range of topics from other users. Examples of social Q&A services include Yahoo! Answers, Answerbag, and Naver Knowledge-IN. People are increasingly using social Q&A sites as a source of information because these services enable them to obtain personalized answers to their questions quickly from a large number of people [7, 10, 19, 20]. For example, Yahoo! Answers, the largest and most popular social Q&A site, received 300 million questions as of July 2012 with two questions being asked and six answered per second on average.\footnote{Yahoo! Answers Blog (http://yanswersblog.com/)}

While people enjoy the benefits of receiving information from other users on social Q&A sites, they may also feel overwhelmed by its volume. Moreover, the benefits of high responsiveness and greater diversity on social Q&A sites are potentially offset by qualitative shortcomings such as low quality answers. People find it difficult to judge the value and credibility of information based on author, content, and source on the Web due to a lack of quality control mechanisms and a limited number of available cues [13, 18]. In social Q&A settings, where people interact with online content created by other users and interact with unknown people, individuals encounter even greater challenges in judging the credibility of information.

Recent studies on social media question asking demonstrate that people behave differently when asking questions of strangers using social Q&A sites as opposed to asking questions of people they already know using social networking sites [14, 16]. People prefer to use social networking sites over social Q&A sites because they trust the opinions of people they know to a greater extent. In social Q&A settings, as interactions occur between strangers, an asker is responsible for assessing the
credibility of an answerer, while an answerer is likely to feel responsible for establishing their credibility when answering a question.

Little is known about the role of credibility judgments in social search using social Q&A sites, while much work has been conducted in the context of e-commerce and marketing and in the context of work organizations. Therefore, it is important to investigate how people make credibility judgments when asking and answering questions within social Q&A settings. In particular, we want to address the following research questions.

- How do users perceive credibility in a social Q&A site?
- What situational and individual factors do affect users’ credibility judgments of answers in a social Q&A setting?
- To what extent, does credibility assessment affect users’ questioning and answering behavior and decision-making in the process of social search?

In the rest of this paper, we first provide a brief overview of related work regarding social Q&A, social search, and credibility assessment on the Web, particularly in social Q&A settings. We then propose a conceptual framework in order to examine credibility judgments in the context of social search using a social Q&A site.

RELATED WORK

Social Q&A

Most studies on social Q&A sites have examined user behavior at an aggregate level by analyzing large data sets such as transaction logs or question-answer pairs [1, 6, 15, 19]. Such aggregate-level analysis has identified the distribution of users in terms of their role as either asker or answerer and users’ patterns of behavior in terms of question type, thread length, and number of answers received [1, 15]. In social Q&A sites, people ask many types of questions, including factual, advice-seeking, discussion-oriented, opinion-oriented, procedural, or task-oriented questions, across a number of topical categories [1, 6, 15]. In general, it appears that little overlap exists between those who ask questions and those who answer questions on social Q&A sites, although some overlap is observed in topical categories that mostly attract factual questions [1, 15, 19].

Responsiveness and diversity of answers resulting from a large community have been identified as two main reasons that people use social Q&A sites for their information seeking [7, 19, 20]. Another reason that people turn to social Q&A sites to satisfy their information needs is because they can receive personalized answers to their questions [10, 19]. As the contributions of answerers play a critical role in maintaining social Q&A services, numerous studies have investigated why people voluntarily answer questions on social Q&A sites. It appears that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a role in encouraging people to answer questions [15, 17]. One’s decision to answer questions is also influenced by his or her first-time experience in social Q&A sites [20].

Social Q&A and Social Search

Broadly speaking, social search refers to the process of finding information online that utilizes social resources through interactions [2, 14]. Social search includes a range of activities such as asking questions of friends, experts, or unknown persons, searching socially-generated content such as tweets to find information, and using a social search engine which is designed to find the right person [2, 3, 9, 12, 14, 16]. Despite the lack of consensus in defining social search, it is generally agreed that social search involves the use of a large number of human mediators to find information online. Therefore, asking a question on a social Q&A site can be viewed as a form of social search.

An increasing number of studies have examined various forms of social search (including question asking) that use social networks and social search engines. These studies have found that people ask their friends a wide variety of question types including requests for recommendations, opinions, or factual information [2, 14]. Studies have also shown that people prefer to obtain an answer from those in their social networks over unknown people because they trust the opinions of people they know [9, 14]. Moreover, people enjoy secondary benefits such as social awareness and fun and pleasure in addition to the primary benefit of receiving answers when asking questions to their social networks [2, 14].

Credibility Assessment in Social Q&A Settings

People find it difficult to judge the value and credibility of information based on author, content, and source on the Web due to a lack of quality control mechanisms and a limited number of available cues [13, 18]. A number of studies have also found that few users rigorously assess the quality of the information they obtain via the Internet and those who do usually use a minimal number of criteria, such as web site design and navigability [4, 13].

In social Q&A settings, where people interact with online content created by other users and interact with unknown people, individuals encounter even greater challenges in judging the credibility of information. Since individuals have few cues on which to rely when assessing information in social Q&A sites, they are becoming more dependent on new types of social cues. People attend to social information which reflects the collective evaluation of other users, such as one’s reputation score based on ratings provided by others. Additionally, when attempting to judge credibility, they pick up affective cues such as attitude or tone which are embedded in questions and answers [10, 11]. Furthermore, any cues may be helpful for developing trust in online settings where there is no strong community or where users often lack long-term engagement, as is the case with social Q&A sites [5]. Existing studies suggest that further research is needed to investigate how social cues
available within social Q&A sites affect users’ credibility judgments.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Conceptual Framework
Figure 1 describes a conceptual framework we propose for credibility assessment in the social Q&A setting. The context for both an asker and an answerer influences the amount of effort one invests in credibility assessment or establishment, respectively. How an asker judges credibility is affected by the amount of effort that he or she invested. The credibility assessment framework developed by Hilligoss and Rieh [8] is incorporated into this conceptual framework in order to examine the dynamics of the credibility assessment process. Hilligoss and Rieh [8] present a model of credibility judgments which includes three distinct levels of credibility judgments: construct, heuristics, and interaction. In the social Q&A setting, the construct level relates to how users conceptualize credibility in a social Q&A site. The heuristics level entails credibility assessment based on general rules of thumb such as an answerer’s reputation, social closeness to an answerer, and the length of an answer. The interaction level involves effortful assessment of specific source or content cues such as an answerer’s qualification, writing style, and number of sources provided in an answer. Investigating credibility assessment at these three levels will enable us to better understand how different factors interact to influence the credibility judgments and, consequently, the perceived success of social search in the social Q&A setting.

Methodological Approach
Certain considerations should be taken into account in designing a study that examines credibility judgments in the context of social search using a social Q&A site. First, selection of a specific social Q&A site for the study matters, as each social Q&A site is unique in terms of its site design, user community, and rewards mechanism. The uniqueness of a site may limit the generalizability of findings to other social Q&A settings. Deciding whether to focus on current users or potential users is another important aspect to consider, as this decision affects subsequent choices, particularly the recruitment method to be used. For example, if a study focuses on current users of a social Q&A site, one may need to decide whether or not to use stratified random sampling. Social Q&A sites often have a reward system such as points or levels to encourage user participation. Thus, the research study may want to sample a certain number of users from each level. Selection of topical categories would also influence the results of the study, as interactions on social Q&A sites exhibit different characteristics depending on topical categories [1, 6, 11]. By considering these various factors, decisions with regard to research design will maximize the validity and generalizability of the study results.

CONCLUSION
People are increasingly using social Q&A sites as a source of information. In these social Q&A settings, people interact with online content created by other users and interact with unknown people. This signifies the importance of understanding how people make credibility judgments with regard to questions and answers posted within social Q&A settings and how perceptions of credibility and process of credibility assessment influence their question asking and answering behaviors. Research that examines question asking and answering behavior at an individual level is especially needed because there are currently few insights into what factors result in particular patterns of behavior in social Q&A settings. The proposed conceptual framework which focuses on three levels of credibility judgments (construct, heuristics, and interaction) will help researchers investigate these questions by enabling them to examine the dynamics of the credibility assessment process in social Q&A settings.

REFERENCES


