Social Q&A and Library Q&A: How one can inform, and be informed by, the other

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this position paper is to initiate a meaningful dialogue between two research communities, one community exploring the nature of social question-and-answer environments (Social Q&A) and the other focusing on library-oriented virtual reference question-and-answer services (Library Q&A). The interaction approaches that facilitate interpersonal communication in each Q&A domain are vastly different on the surface, but a common goal lies at the core of both Social Q&A and Library Q&A: to receive a question and deliver an answer and/or trusted information to someone who needs it. Two questions arise from this comparison: 1) can what’s been learned about Social Q&A be leveraged to transform Library Q&A service offerings? and 2) what can Social Q&A learn from how information professionals have conducted virtual reference question-and-answer services in libraries and information organizations? Presented are recommendations for avenues of inquiry and research.

Author Keywords
Question-answering, social Q&A, virtual reference, human information behavior, information-seeking, social media.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.3.5. Online Information Services.

INTRODUCTION
From the perspective of the library and information sciences (LIS) research literature, consulting people in leisure, academic and work information- or help-seeking contexts is an established information behavior (e.g., [1]; [2]). The current technology-rich landscape, which includes an array of social media, facilitates interpersonal communication at people’s time- and place-of-need. It is unsurprising that people utilize novel information and communication technologies to connect with other people. However, the speed of technology advancement and technology’s impacts on information-seeking have left library-oriented virtual reference question-and-answer services (Library Q&A) struggling to keep pace with social question-and-answer environments (Social Q&A).

In libraries and information organizations, a range of digital technologies – telephone, email, chat/IM, text messaging, Facebook, Twitter – permitting asynchronous and synchronous interaction have been incorporated to extend the reach of information professional for receiving questions, and to connect information seekers with answers, authoritative information resources, referrals, and search strategy guidance. Despite efforts undertaken to enhance the library user’s experience, the number of questions posed to Library Q&A services is declining (e.g., [3]) and virtual reference question-and-answer services have closed (e.g., [4]).

In contrast, Social Q&A environments are thriving, with new platforms and tools introduced on a regular basis (e.g., [5]). Community-driven Social Q&A efforts, including StackExchange and Quora, have revolutionized an information seeker’s ability to obtain information from multiple people. Because of the variety of Social Q&A platforms, as well as the one-to-one nature of Library Q&A interactions (generally, one information seeker and one information professional) – as opposed to the one-to-many in Social Q&A – information professionals are challenged to keep library users engaged and satisfied with the ease of question submission and speed of response.

LIBRARY Q&A AND SOCIAL Q&A
Library information professionals have infiltrated Social Q&A environments to apply their skills and expertise. For example, as part of the “Slam the Boards!” initiative, information professionals volunteer their time answering questions in Social Q&A environments to showcase to the public the high-quality answers that information professionals can provide. In fact, Enquire UK’s information professionals’ efforts as a Knowledge Partner for Yahoo! Answers have answers rated as “best answer” 79% of the time [6].

Despite (1) information professionals’ activity in Social Q&A environments and (2) the sheer prevalence of Social Q&A environments, the features of Social Q&A – in terms of interaction processes and interface design – have not migrated into Library Q&A. Existing library-oriented
virtual reference question-and-answer models remain one-to-one interactions hidden from the public, and the results of the exchange – including an answer and/or information sources – get housed in a database unavailable for future consultation. This approach reflects philosophical and practical differences between the two Q&A domains, but these differences should not obscure the common goal that lies at their core: receiving a question and delivering an answer and/or trusted information to an information seeker.

OPPORTUNITIES
This common goal – connecting information seekers with an expert-supplied answer – leads to several relevant questions about how 1) library information professionals and researchers can participate in the design and evaluation of Social Q&A environments and 2) CSCW, HCI, and Social Q&A researchers can apply their skills and expertise in shaping Library Q&A services. Five opportunities are outlined below.

1) There are obviously a number of ways Library Q&A services can be enhanced to better utilize social media technologies, but there are several key questions about the role of these technologies in encouraging library users to ask questions. For instance, social media technologies have been adopted for library virtual reference question-and-answer services but their impact has been unclear. An objective is to determine best practices for incorporating social media technologies into Library Q&A services in ways that can balance library resource constraints with the need to effectively serve library users.

2) How are Q&A environments designed to lead the information seeker to ask their question to the most appropriate platform or tool based on the question being asked? Information seekers expect their inquiry to be handled appropriately. Based on the question being asked, there may be Library Q&A services equipped to accommodate the question originally posed to a Social Q&A environment, which would create a unique model of interaction between Q&A domains.

3) Information seekers’ questions can pertain to singular situations while other questions are related to longer-term information needs and seeking activities that span weeks or months. Can we trace question-asking behavior that involves longer-term and intensely critical or meaningful inquiries? Library information professionals in university libraries who offer research consultations through liaison relationships with academic departments may shed light on the qualitative and quantitative methods used to evaluate in-depth and repeated question-asking behaviors.

4) Library usage research has examined the characteristics of information seekers who pose questions to Library Q&A services, and have created typologies of the questions asked (e.g., [7]). Knowing about the types of questions asked has enhanced information services offerings [8]. Additionally, library usage research has reported on the conversational elements of question-asking and -answering and on the role of affect in interactions, which may be useful in developing new features in Q&A platforms and tools.

5) Library information professionals adhere to ethical guidelines established by professional associations (e.g., [9], which include principles concerning privacy and the sharing of user data self-reported as part of question submission to a Library Q&A service. A central research question includes how to cleanse these question submission data without losing meaningful information to coherently analyze or paint a detailed picture of an information seeker’s question asking ecology.

CONCLUSION
The degree to which Social Q&A services and Library Q&A overlap is a matter for debate, but the rate at which information seekers utilize emerging information and communication technologies requires innovative approaches to study Q&A environments and to identify untapped opportunities for positioning Q&A for the future.

REFERENCES