

Editorial Board Thoughts: “India does not exist.”

Mark Cyzyk

Often, I find myself trolling online forums, searching for and praying I find a bona-fide solution to a technical problem. Typically, my process begins with the annoying discovery that many others are running into the same, or very similar, difficulty. *Many* others. Once I get over my initial frustration (“Why isn’t this problem fixed by now?”), I proceed to read, to attempt to determine which of the often conflicting and even contradictory suggestions for fixing the problem might actually *work*.

I thought it would be instructive to step back for a moment and examine this experience. To do so, I want to use as my example, as my straw man, not a technical question, but a more generic question, the sort of question anyone might conceivably ask. I’ll ask this question, then I’ll list what I think might be answers, in form and substance, from the technical forums had it been asked there:

“I want to go to India. How best to get there?”

Why would you want to go there?

You could fly.

You could take a ship.

Why go to India? Iceland is much better.

I went to India once and it wasn’t that great.

You never specify where in India you want to go. We can’t help you until you tell us where in India you want to go.

I am sick and tired of these people who don’t read the forums. Your query has been answered before.

The only way to get there is to fly first class on Continental.

You could ride a mule to India.

New Zealand is much better. You should go there instead.

It is impossible to go to India.

You can get from India to anywhere in Europe very easily via India Air.

*You should read *A Passage to India*, I forget who wrote it. I read it as an undergraduate. It was very good.*

You are an idiot for wanting to go to India.

India does not exist.

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I think it's safe to say that the signal to noise ratio here is high. If we truly want to answer a question, we don't want to add noise. Pontificating, posturing, and automatically posing as a mentor in a mentor/protégé relationship will typically be construed as adding nothing but noise to the signal. In most cases, we who answer such questions are *not* here to educate, except insofar as we provide a clear and concise answer to a technical query issued by one of our peers.

What should we assume? First off, we should assume that the person writing the question is sincere: He truly does *want* to go to India. We need not question his motives. The best way to think about this is that the query is a hypothetical: *If* he were to want to go to India, how best to do it? If *you* were to want to go to India, how best to do it? This requires a certain level of empathy on the part of the one answering the question, a level of empathy of which the technical forums are all but devoid. Many answers on those forums are so tone-deaf to human need they may as well have been written by robots.

"How best to get there" is tricky because you must make some assumptions. Assumptions are fine as long as you're explicit about them. One assumption might be: He is leaving from the East Coast of the United States. Another assumption might be: He is going to India only for a short while, for a conference or vacation. Yet another one might be: By "best" he means "quickest, most efficient, least expensive." Stating these assumptions, then stating your answer to the question, is appropriate and is what is most helpful. Stating your assumptions is tantamount to stating your understanding of the original question, its scope and context. This is always a helpful thing to do when attempting to communicate with another human being.

Now, communication and plumbing the depth of human need, at least with respect to informational and bibliographic needs, has always been a strong suit of librarians, so what I write here is not really directed at librarians. It is, though, directed at we who straddle both the library world and the technology world, if that distinction is not a false one and can be usefully made. I think it important for those of us split between two cultures to ensure that we fall to one side and not the other, in particular that we do not fall into the oftentimes loutish and ultimately unproductive communication mores exhibited by many of the online technical forums.

Whenever my wife and I hear a news story on TV or radio openly wondering why more women do not go into I.T., I blurt out something like: "You wanna know why? Just go read the comments section of most posts at Slashdot.com. Why on earth would anyone who didn't have to put up with that kind of culture actually choose to put up with it?"

Isn't "India does not exist" exactly the kind of response one would find on Slashdot.com if the initial question was, "I want to go to India -- how best to get there?"?

With all this in mind, I hereby issue my own question, this time a technical one:

"I want to programmatically convert a largish set of documents from PDF to DOCX format. How best to do it?"

I hope you don't think I'm an idiot.