



Too Much of a Good Thing? Anonymity, Doxing, and the Ethics of Reddit



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The popular social media site Reddit is no stranger to controversy. Through the creation of “handles” or account names, it creates an anonymous or pseudo-anonymous forum that is meant to “encourage a fair and tolerant place for ideas, people, links, and discussion.” Sometimes, this is what happens. The anonymous nature of the forum, while encouraging free expression and speech, has also caused numerous problems. The current CEO, Steve Huffman, stated that “legal content should not be removed ... even if we

find it odious or if we personally condemn it.” This allows for the flourishing of subreddits, or specific communities of commenters and topics, that otherwise would be seen as distasteful and worthy of deletion by many other constituencies using Reddit.

However, this is not to say that Reddit has a complete open door policy. Aja Romano notes that Reddit has banned at least three “alt-right” subreddits permanently for their breaking of aspects of the Reddit User Agreement since 2017. More specifically, the subreddits in question and their members were accused of “doxing,” or the releasing of an individual’s identifying information without permission, an action that is forbidden by Reddit’s “Content Policy.” For example, members of r/altright attempted to dox and place a “bounty” on the man who punched the white nationalist Richard Spencer on Donald Trump’s inauguration day. A significant factor in the decision to ban these alt-right subreddits was the political worries swaths of the online public held concerning the alt-right movement and its members’ activities on the site in general. Reddit’s banning of these alt-right subreddits has led to an outcry for the closure of other controversial subreddits. One targeted subreddit, the notable r/The_Donald, stands as the site’s most visible conservative platform, having over half a million subscribers. Steve Huffman, the CEO of Reddit, has stated that he fears sliding down a slippery slope of censorship—in other words, he is concerned that the censoring any content, alt-right or not, in the site’s earlier years could lead to further repression of ideas and speech. This regard for preserving free speech and avoiding unnecessary censorship persists in the ways that Reddit deals with censorship now.

Going down this path means that Reddit is tasked with deciding what speech is permissible and which communities must be banned or encouraged to flourish. Many claim that censoring the anonymous online community is a slippery slope that can lead to suppression of groups that may not be popular in the public sphere. Others might argue that the fun and usefulness of the online world lies in its creative anarchy that often challenges accepted norms and standard views. Who decides which controversial views fall into the category of *hateful* or *reprehensible* views? In contrast, those who advocate the removal of such subreddits claim that Reddit has a duty to keep the community of their site feeling safe and protected as a whole. They also note that Reddit can set its terms of service however it wants, and that doxing targeted individuals is currently forbidden. Should Reddit tolerate speech that many of its members find to be intolerant?



Discussion Questions:

1. What are the values at stake in Reddit's deliberation over shutting down certain subreddits?
2. Is Reddit responsible for any harassment or harms that may come from information posted in its forums?
3. What are some of the ethical challenges of defining "distasteful," "hateful," or even "racist" content on forums such as Reddit?
4. Should an entity like Reddit enable all types of speech? In other words, does Reddit have a legal or ethical duty to help all views be heard? Or can it pick and choose what views are privileged on its platform?
5. Some argue that the best way to resist and reform reprehensible views is to allow them out into the open so they can be refuted or disproven. Do you think this tactic would work in public forums such as Reddit?

Further Information:

Reddit Content Policy. Available at: <https://www.reddit.com/help/contentpolicy>

Reddit User Agreement. September 27, 2017. Available at: <https://www.reddit.com/help/useragreement/>

"Reddit will not ban 'distasteful' content, chief executive says." October 17, 2012. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-19975375>

Aja Romano, "Reddit shuts down 3 major alt-right forums due to harassment." *Vox*, February 03, 2017. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/2/3/14486856/reddit-bans-alt-right-doxing-harassment>

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