

Reddit takes back reins from users at a risk

July 19 2015, by Glenn Chapman



Reddit co-founder Steve Huffman has returned as chief executive saying he and co-founder Alexis Ohanian (pictured L) set up the company as a place for "open and honest discussion"

Reddit became one of the most visited websites in the world on the backs of users devoted to the online bulletin board where people could post just about anything.

Reddit benefits from a free workforce of volunteers who moderate discussion forums known as "subreddits," on topics running a gamut

from science and religion to white supremacy and woman-bashing.

US President Barack Obama and billionaire Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates are among those who have taken part in Ask Me Anything (AMA) question-and-answer sessions that are an attention-getting staple at the online bulletin board.

Yet, since its launch a decade ago in Massachusetts, [users](#) have taken the Reddit reins, straying at times into "dark" lanes littered with hateful, offensive and borderline illegal content.

Reddit co-founder Steve "spez" Huffman stepped back in as chief executive this week and set out to tame the wild side of the site.

"If you are going to behave badly, someone is going to eventually take away your privilege," independent Internet technology analyst Rob Enderle said of moves to clamp down at Reddit.

"You can't behave with impunity indefinitely."

'The trolls are winning'

Reddit is grappling with a challenge faced by social networks including Facebook and Twitter when it comes to stifling nastiness while avoiding alienating users on whom its fortunes depend.

"Neither Alexis nor I created Reddit to be a bastion of free speech, but rather as a place where open and honest discussion can happen," Huffman said in a message announcing his recent AMA.

Reddit is a for-profit business operated as a subsidiary of Advance Publications.

Its forums are moderated by volunteers who tend to be passionate about the bulletin board being an online venue for saying whatever users want no matter how inane, outrageous or offensive.

In his AMA, Huffman reached out for feedback on constrictions that Reddit is considering placing on the kinds of content that can be posted.



Ellen Pao, who headed Reddit for a brief and stormy tenure, was ousted after disgruntled users demanded she leave

The move comes in the wake of the departure of Ellen Pao, who headed the company until disgruntled users demanded her departure.

A number of people on the site posted sexist and inflammatory comments about Pao.

"Balancing free expression with privacy and the protection of participants has always been a challenge for open-content platforms on the Internet," Pao said this week in an editorial published in The Washington Post.

"But that balancing act is getting harder. The trolls are winning."

Revenge porn banned

Early this year, Reddit banned non-consensual pornography referred to as [revenge porn](#) because it typically involves former romantic partners who have not given permission for sharing content.

Reddit last month ditched five subreddit forums, including one devoted to making fun of fat people, under terms of a new anti-harassment policy.

Other content Reddit is thinking of banning includes spam, people's private information and anything that incites harm or violence, or could be considered abusive or bullying.

"Reddit is the Internet, and it exhibits all the good, the bad and the ugly of the Internet," Pao said in her editorial.

"It has been fighting this harassment in the trenches."

Pornography and content that "offends the sense of decency" will be sectioned off in a previously-established Not Safe For Work (NSFW) zone that Reddit users will be able to opt into at their discretion, according to Huffman.

"Basically, Reddit got the huge number of users it now wants to monetize by using 'free speech!' as an excuse to let every user run wild,"

a user with the screen name Mrs. Eccentric commented.

Efforts to now clean Reddit up and make it more attractive to advertisers are "making the users scream bloody murder," the post contended.

Pao takes the heat

Reddit moderator Matthew Amadea said during a forum on KQED public radio in San Francisco that he signed the a petition demanding Pao's ouster because of ramped-up commercialization under her administration.

"Reddit was founded as a site completely run by users and would not sell out," Amadea said.

"When you commercialize it, you are putting more ads into it and you are pushing some sort of an agenda."

Reddit, which boasted about 170 million users before the turmoil in recent months, describes itself as a venue for real-time journalism and "the front page of the Internet."

About three quarters of those using Reddit are said to be young men.

"The site lends itself to a kind of boyism that, at best, could be off-putting to women," David Weinberger, a senior researcher at Harvard University's Berkman Center for the Internet and Society, said during the KQED forum.

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