

How social media's biggest user protest rocked Reddit

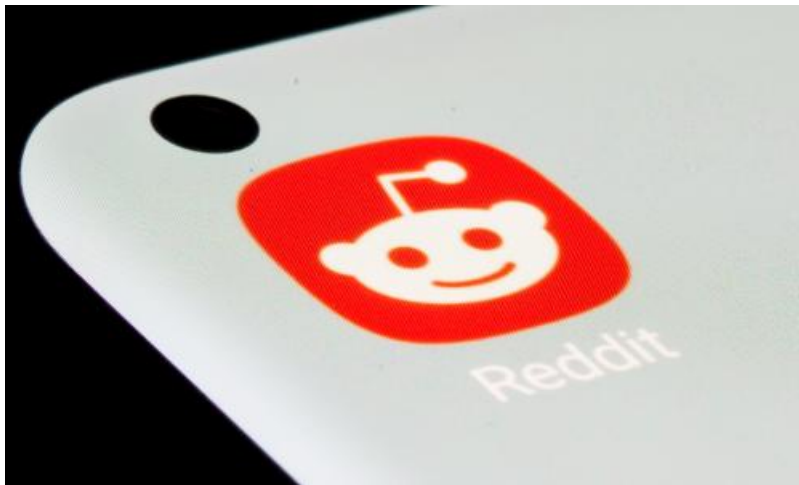
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In June, thousands of Reddit communities plunged into darkness – making their pages inaccessible to the public in a mass protest of corporate policy changes. Users of a social network lambasting it is nothing new; but Reddit's moderators rebelled on a scale never seen before. Six months later, users and researchers say reforms sparked by the movement are still rippling through the social network, which bills itself as the “front page of the internet”. The changes are a mixed bag, they say. The quality of the posts on the forum site has changed, some say, but the social network's corporate parent appears more attentive, making changes long requested by users and moderators alike. The conflict with the company left Reddit's denizens angry and skeptical, but many say they're sticking around to see how things go with Reddit's new normal. When asked for comment on the protest and the demands of participants, a spokesperson from Reddit highlighted a response from the company's CEO, Steve Huffman, who stated: “We are all responsible for ensuring Reddit provides an open, accessible place for people to find community and belonging. “We respect when you and your communities take action to highlight the things you need, including, at times, going private,” he said. The protest began because of Reddit's mid-year decision to begin charging for access to its API, or application programming interface. The change hampered the ability of outside companies and users to work with data from the social network for their own products and services. It sparked outrage from Reddit's army of unpaid content moderators, many of whom relied on such tools to keep the site running. In response, more than 8,000 subreddits – forums within Reddit – with hundreds of millions of subscribers collectively went offline for days. Some of the site's largest destinations went dark or turned into absurd, unusable parodies featuring only photos of John Oliver. The scale of the response reflected the passionate user base of Reddit, which sought to defend a site with a strong platform ethos – a place that has been described as “one of the last good social media sites”, where the sharing and policing of content is democratized. RamsesThePigeon, who has been a user of Reddit for more than 12 years and a moderator for most of that time, said users' reasons for participating in the protest varied by user and subreddit but largely centered around content moderation. He is a volunteer moderator for several of Reddit's largest communities who prefers to be quoted by his username due to the anonymous nature of his occupation. For many, the unilateral decision from Reddit was a slap in the face to the volunteers who devote hours of unpaid labor to keep the site running. The protest, he said, made the average user more aware of that. “Moderators very often feel like they don't get nearly enough support, and almost no say whatsoever in the direction that Reddit the company has taken,” he said. “This particular protest and the events that prompted it were a lot of folks' first exposure to the tension that exists beneath the surface – it shook a lot of users' faith in what they thought was a smoothly running system.” Reddit executives reasoned that the changes were needed to

prevent companies, especially artificial intelligence startups creating large language models, from using Reddit's data for free. With rumors of an imminent IPO swirling, the company is under pressure to make money – and CEO Huffman has acknowledged as much, stating at the time of the change: “Reddit needs to be a self-sustaining business, and to do that, we can no longer subsidize commercial entities that require large-scale data use.” But revoking access hollowed out some browsing services favored by users who say the Reddit app was lacking in navigability. Users with vision impairments and other accessibility needs relied on third-party apps, as well as by moderators using third-party tools to access and take action on posts more easily and systematically. Tim Rathschmidt, a Reddit spokesperson, said the API changes were meant to apply to large-scale commercial entities and that the platform's API was still open for non-commercial use under certain stipulations, including for research and academia by request. Regarding moderator complaints, Rathschmidt said the platform was “grateful for all the people who contribute to building community on Reddit, and mods most of all”. He noted that several weeks ago the platform launched a central resource for mods and that Reddit had made “significant progress” on mobile mod tools and plans to continue to introduce updates and new features. “We know what mods do is hard work, and we are working closely with them on a regular basis to ensure we are addressing their needs and hearing directly from them to help improve Reddit,” he said. A handful of the top-used Reddit add-ons immediately folded after the changes. Apollo, with more than 1 million monthly users, condemned the company's actions in a post to Reddit: “If they wanted something that could work for everyone, they would have simply made an effort to listen, instead of being dishonest, callous, and punitive in pricing.” Rathschmidt said Reddit had signed agreements with third-party browsers Luna, Dystopia and Redreader, and that “conversations continue with others”. After complaints that the folding of some third-party browsing platforms affected usability for vision-impaired users and other users with disabilities, Reddit conducted an accessibility audit with an external consultant. The company had been “working on improving accessibility on the site and in our apps”, Rathschmidt said, and had created an accessibility feedback group. Reddit was on track to have full compliance with the World Wide Web Consortium's accessibility guidelines by the end of 2024, he said. Despite these concessions, dozens of Redditors promised to stop using the site altogether without access to their favorite browsing apps. But according to data from the website analytics firm Similarweb, traffic has largely remained consistent to the platform, aside from a pronounced dip during the blackout. Posts on Reddit get worse; research gets blocked The fight over Reddit's API usage was, on its face, a simple business decision. What followed, however, was a broader debate about online labor and community. Hanging in the balance was the future of a social network with a user base whose members had devoted millions of hours to their online home. While traffic has not changed substantially, many users report the quality of content and the kinds of posts that are surfaced on user homepages now seem different. RamsesThePigeon said the content on some of Reddit's most-followed pages, which he moderates, had “gone sharply downhill”. Stevie Chancellor, an assistant professor in the department of computer science and engineering at the University of Minnesota who has studied Reddit for years, echoed these sentiments. “A lot of people who made Reddit a place where people wanted to be are not there any more, and a lot of high-quality content that I went to Reddit for is gone,” she said. “There has been a noticeable decline in the quality of content, both in terms of what is posted and what people talk about.” In response to such critiques, Reddit spokesperson Rathschmidt said he did not “know of an industry benchmark for scoring content quality”. Exactly how those changes are playing out is difficult to parse without access to the API – the issue at the heart of the protest to begin with, said Chancellor, who previously used Reddit's API to study the quality and safety of mental health content shared to the site. Reddit is not the only company with API transparency issues. In February, Twitter (now X) also eliminated access to its API while Meta and TikTok have long refused meaningful access. “It bothers me that social media companies are increasingly restricting our abilities as researchers who care deeply about these sites and who believe they can provide many benefits for people,” Chancellor said. “The right to public scrutiny being increasingly damaged by corporate interests is a huge problem.” Reddit wins? Reddit's corporate overlords were ultimately unmoved by the massive blackout, and most of the thousands of dark subreddits went back to normal after a few weeks. While many declared that Reddit won its fight against the moderator uprising – advertisers stayed, traffic and user numbers remained stable – the protest did inspire some meaningful changes, said Sarah Gilbert, a postdoctoral associate at Cornell University who studies Reddit and community moderation. “It's been a mix in the six months since the protests took place,” she said. “There have been a lot of really positive developments, and it seems Reddit is working really hard to bridge some of those gaps – but the gaps were so huge that some moderators have been struggling in the meantime.” Perhaps the most pronounced impact of the protest, and Reddit's response to it, has been cultural. Users who have long been dedicated to the site, some of whom have spent countless unpaid hours working to make it better, are exhausted and resentful – and many have simply left. “By the time you read this my account will have been deleted,” one now-deleted account commented on a subreddit dedicated to the third-party app Apollo. “Bye, Reddit.” Those who remain are feeling the impact. “The quality of my feed is noticeably down,” one wrote. “People complaining that ‘if you don't like it why aren't you leaving?’ are missing a vital point – people are leaving,” one user wrote on a thread discussing changes to the site shortly after the protest. RamsesThePigeon, for his part, said he planned to stay on Reddit for the time being – even though he maintains that the site's quality has been on a decline for quite some time before the protests further accelerated it. Like many, he has long championed the ethos of Reddit. “Reddit could be the best site on the internet,” he said. “It could be a place to share ideas, expertise, entertainment, information and perspectives from all over the world. A place where everyone could have a voice with the only requirement being that they think before using it. And

unfortunately, Reddit has not done anything to encourage that.”