

# TechScape: After a brutal blackout, will Reddit ever be the same?

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Welcome back to TechScape, where I – along with a rotating cast of tech writers – will help fill Alex Hern's shoes while he's on parental leave. He'll make the first of some occasional appearances in the newsletter in a few weeks, but what might not return any time soon are some of Reddit's most popular communities. Last week, the pages of Reddit went dark – with thousands taking their forums offline to protest against a decision by the platform to impose fees on third-party tools many rely on to make the site more efficient. The protest came after Reddit announced that as of this week it will limit access to the site's API, or application programming interface, which allows outside companies and users to work with platform data for their own products and services. The decision will help allow the company to monetise the large trove of its data already being used by researchers and companies to build artificial intelligence tools, and represents an intensifying battle for companies to balance efforts to moderate – and profit from – the meteoric rise of artificial intelligence with the needs of users. "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," Reddit CEO Steve Huffman wrote in a post on the platform explaining the decision, which comes months before he plans to take the company public in the US. Is an r/SpamTsunami coming? Driving the outrage over Reddit's policy change are thousands of volunteer moderators whose countless hours of unpaid labour keep the platform running smoothly. For years such power users have – along with performing the vital task of keeping subs on track, helpful, fair and just plain nice – relied heavily on third-party apps that plug into Reddit's API and allow them to more effectively remove hateful content and misinformation. In pushing forward with the new API policies, Reddit risks alienating its most important user base. Wired warned of a possible "death spiral" when referring to a possible user exodus from Reddit, along the lines of that seen at Twitter. The move could have other disastrous effects, said Sarah Gilbert, postdoctoral associate at Cornell University and expert on content moderation. "Changes like these, particularly the poor communication surrounding them, risks diminishing motivation among existing mods, increasing burnout, and it may be more challenging to find and recruit new moderators." Without these volunteer mods, she says, "the site could likely see less helpful content, and more spam, misinformation and hate". Reddit's effort to monetise its massive trove of user data comes amid a growing boom in AI tools and its own plans to make an initial public offering, expected later this year. But moderators call the move short-sighted. In a post shared on r/LifeProTips, one of the most popular Reddit communities with more than 22 million members, mods implored the company to reverse its decision, stating that "it will undermine the site as a whole". r/LifeProTips is one of more than 8,000 "subreddits", the name for Reddit forums, that went dark in protest. "We implore Reddit to listen to its moderators,

its contributors, and its everyday users; to the people whose activity has allowed the platform to exist at all," they wrote. "Do not sacrifice long-term viability for the sake of a short-lived illusion. Do not tacitly enable bad actors by working against your volunteers. Do not posture for your looming IPO while giving no thought to what may come afterward." Huffman, seemingly unmoved by such pleas, told NPR a few days ago: "I think it's time we grow up and behave like an adult company." Yet as John Naughton argued in the Observer, it's a "sleight of mind" for a company that relies on the unpaid labour of so many volunteers to complain that tech giants could capitalise on its wealth of data to help train their large language models: "It's a bit rich to hear him complaining about LLMs, which were – and are – being trained via the largest and most comprehensive exercise in intellectual piracy in the history of mankind." How (not) to train your AI

Reddit's tightening of its API has been painted as largely for financial motive, but it might also be an attempt to address broader concerns about the integration of user data into AI tools. Some have worried that the Reddit API, which includes archives, could resurface user-deleted data, and that tools trained on forums that may include hate speech and misinformation will replicate such issues. Reddit's decision to close its API to AI creators comes after Meta announced it would be doing the opposite: making its own model open source to allow users to create their own artificial intelligence-powered chatbots and other technology. It raised alarm from experts and competitors, who said it would enable the technology to more easily be used to spread misinformation and hate speech at a larger scale. But Meta's move stands in stark contrast to competitors in the AI space like Google and OpenAI, who have made their language model processes – and the data that trains them – increasingly closed off. Before the AI arms race began to heat up, Twitter also started charging for API access. Proposed changes could, experts argue, actually diminish Reddit's value, eliminating its indispensable volunteer moderation resources. Stevie Chancellor, assistant professor in the department of computer science and engineering at the University of Minnesota, said her department's past research showed moderator labour "makes up a notable portion of Reddit's actual monetary value", saying: "Reddit now has to contend with monetising the work of moderators that keeps subreddits safe and friendly – and the important tools that mods use to make their lives easier." (One study estimated that Reddit moderators carry out more than \$3.4m in unpaid labour each year.) Despite the growing backlash, however, Reddit has been steadfast in its decision. In an internal company email, Huffman wrote: "We absolutely must ship what we said we would." But hundreds of moderators plan to continue the forum blackouts indefinitely. In the collective post made to r/LifeProTips, mods made it clear they believe the future of the website is at stake. "Rather than hosting creativity and in-depth discourse, the platform will soon feature only recycled content, bot-driven activity, and an ever-dwindling number of well-informed visitors," they wrote. "The very elements which differentiate Reddit – the foundations that draw its audience – will be eliminated, reducing the site to another dead cog in the Ennui Engine." If you want to read the complete version of the newsletter please subscribe to receive TechScape in your inbox every Tuesday.