Harvard University

Harvard Extension School

Reddit's Constant Conflict between Freedom of Speech and their Censorship of Hate Speech and Personal Attacks in it's Conspiracy Sub-category

Assignment 4: Rough Draft

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Introduction

Source: Front page of Reddit.com.

Reddit is a platform that enables interactions and the exchange of information and content between it's users and viewers. The website's concept is simple, it allows registered users the ability to submit articles, links, stories, and such onto the website. These would subsequently be voted up or down by the Reddit community. The community users would contribute to sub-categories such as technology, fitness, and politics. Within each sub-Reddit (a sub-category), it would consist of it's own etiquette, – called reddiquette – rules, and regulations. These would be used as a guidance for users to follow. Moderators would be chosen to enforce these rules; the majority would consist of existing users, as well as Reddit employees (algorithms). One of the interesting aspects of Reddit is it's belief of maintaining the ideals of freedom of speech; yet with it's censorship for sensitive issues such as hate speech and offensive comments, these appears rather contrary. Therefore it would be imperative to research upon the conflicts of Reddit's belief of Freedom of Speech, and the rules and regulations it enforces on it's users. The "Conspiracy" community – a sub-category of Reddit – will be used for this research.

Throughout the history of Reddit, there had been conflicts between their belief of Freedom of Speech, and censorship of certain speeches or topics. For example, Reddit had deleted sensitive sub-categories before, such as /r/jailbait and /r/TheFappening. It had also censored /r/technology too, filtering keywords such as "Tesla", "Comcast", "NSA", or "Snowden". (Ref 2) This creates a subjective moral distinction between Freedom of Speech and hate speech/offensive speech. How does Reddit dictate what is considered as hateful or offensive? But doesn't censorship also breach their beliefs for Freedom of Speech? With research on this issue, I hope to accomplish a better understanding of this moral issue that has plagued many modern websites as well as the way Reddit enforces their rules on it's community.

Two Part Step to Analyzing the Reddit Community

Step 1: To analyze and evaluate the ways Reddit's subcategory /r/Conspiracy enforces its rules and regulations on it's community.

Step 2: Analyze and evaluate how Reddit's subcategory /r/Conspiracy may enforce their rules thus directly or indirectly censoring contents by the users.

Thesis

The sub-Reddit Conspiracy community's enforcement of it's rules and regulations on its users, and the plausible censorship it may directly or indirectly cause.

Detailed Introduction of Reddit and /r/Conspiracy

Reddit was founded by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian on the 23rd of June 2005. Their headquarters are located in San Francisco, California. The current employee count is at 71,

and their slogan is "The front page of the internet". With the investments by Snoop Dogg(Calvin Cordozar Broadus Jr.) and Jared Leto in October 2014, it places the valuation of Reddit at $50 million. The name "Reddit" was in fact short for "read it" or "I read it on Reddit", etc. This was the founder's attempt to play on the words. The website has 50 default categories or default subreddits, and over 5,400 active subreddits. As mentioned above, new posts could be up-voted or down-voted by the community. Each subreddit has its own "front page" which presents the most recent and popular posts. (Ref 1)

Registration to be a user on Reddit is free. Users could then up-vote or down-vote posts, or post their own findings too. Users are also allowed to comment on other people's posts or their own. Subsequently, their comments and posts could be up-voted too which gives them "karma" points, called "link karma" or "comment karma". For outstanding quality posts or comments, the user may be given "reddit gold", the highest distinction of karma points. One must have reddit gold "creddits" in order to give them out to others. This acts more of a honor within the reddit community than some sort of exchangeable currency. On the yearly commencement of a user's registration, their account would be known as "cake day" for 24 hours. This is to honor their account being set up for a year, and that they have been a redditor for a/another year. Redditors could also friend one another within the community. (Ref 1)

One of the most popular subreddits which led to reddit's overall popularity increase would be the IAmA subreddit. This would likely consist of "Ask Me Anything" posts where reddit users would ask the person (most likely a celebrity or someone famous) questions which would be answered live. President Barack Obama would be the most famous of all as well as the most popular IAmA user. Aside from that, "Today I learned" (TIL) and "Shower Thoughts" were also popular subreddits with a twist. (Ref 1)

The subreddit that I will be focusing on is /r/Conspiracy. This subreddit consists of about 300,000 users that subscribe to it. Within it's jurisdiction, it includes a few sub-sub-categories too, such as political conspiracy, financial conspiracy, MISC & Police State, False Flag, 9/11, Reddit Shills, Secret Societies, UFOs, Historical Conspiracies, Assassinations, and more. Perhaps on top of it all would be how they define conspiracy. Their sub-category's definition is that a "secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful" and "a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something". (Ref 4) Below, I have included the rules of Reddit, and the rules of reddit's subcategory /r/Conspiracy.

Rules of Reddit

Source: Reddit Logo on Front Page

1. Don't Spam.

2. Don't ask for votes or engage in vote manipulation.

3. Don't post personal information.

4. No child pornography or sexually suggestive content featuring minors.

5. Don't break the site or do anything that interferes with normal use of the site.

These are the actual rules set by Reddit, but furthermore, there are "guidance" suggestions called reddiquette to help users dictate what to post and say in the comments. Since reddiquette isn't a strongly enforced "rule" that must be obeyed, I shall skip that section for now. (Ref 4)

Rules of Reddit's subcategory /r/Conspiracy

Source: Sub-Reddit /r/Conspiracy's Logo.

1. Derisive slurs against people's race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, social order or creed are not tolerated.

2. No accusations of rules violations in comments. Please report violations.

3. No blog spam/malicious web sites.

4. No abusive/threatening language.

5. No stalking or trolling.

6. No caps lock.

7. Facebook links are subject to removal.

8. Memes are no longer allowed here, use /r/ConspiracyMemes. Other image posts are subject to removal at moderators discretion.

9. Posting links in other subs pointing to specific submission or comments here is subject to ban, depending on context.

10. Posts that attack the sub, users or mods will be removed. Accusing another of being a troll or shill is considered an attack. Repeat offenders are subject to a ban.

As you can see, the subreddit actually has more enforceable rules placed on top of the rules of Reddit. These would be the rules (with a focus on the subreddit ones) that I shall focus on. They could show us how the moderators enforce these rules, and whether there would be gray areas that reveals itself which leads to plausible censorship of user's posts and comments; a violation of the website's belief of Freedom of Speech. One interesting aspect that I'd like to take note of is what they wrote on the foot notes. I shall present them below as it says; quite a bit. (Ref 6)

FOOTNOTE: The admins probably don't appreciate us doing this, just like they probably don't appreciate us publishing all of our post removals in /r/uncensorship[4] . But this is how we roll here, and we don't feel we should be obligated to act as never-ending "default cover-up accomplices" to these forms of "hiding stuff". – Reference 6

This says quite a bit. It also makes my job of analyzing the subcategory a lot easier. I would be able to look at deleted posts understand why the moderators have done what they did to remove or ban a user/post. It does show a the speed of execution, the type of posts being removed, and a good guess of the reason for the removal. (Ref 7)

Moderators


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moderators of /r/conspiracy

illuminatedwax (5291)          7 years ago        full permissions
Sarah_Connor (13251)           2 years ago        full permissions
mr_dong (34377)                1 year ago         full permissions
AssuredlyAThrowAway (146310)   1 year ago         full permissions
axolotl_peyotl (333333)        1 year ago         full permissions
9000sins (9223)                1 year ago         full permissions
User_Name13 (891573)           12 months ago      full permissions
Ambiguously_Ironic (8)         4 months ago       full permissions
Orangutan (883192)             4 months ago       full permissions
creq (14701)                   4 months ago       full permissions
SovereignMan (115781)          3 months ago       full permissions
nucensorship (2306)            3 months ago       no permissions
AutoModerator (599)            2 months ago       full permissions
Flytape (19240)                20 days ago        full permissions
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Source: http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/about/moderators

The above shows a list of all the moderators of subreddit /r/Conspiracy. It also shows whether they have "full permissions" or not. This indicates their power as a moderator. Do not confuse this with a Reddit administrator. An administrator is a Reddit employee and has much more power than moderators. Moderators are self-governing by the subcategory's community and existing founders and moderators. I would like you to pay attention to SovereignMan and Flytape. These two moderators were on my radar for the past month for their actions that contributes to removals of posts or comments of users. I shall first talk about SovereignMan.

SovereignMan:

SovereignMan
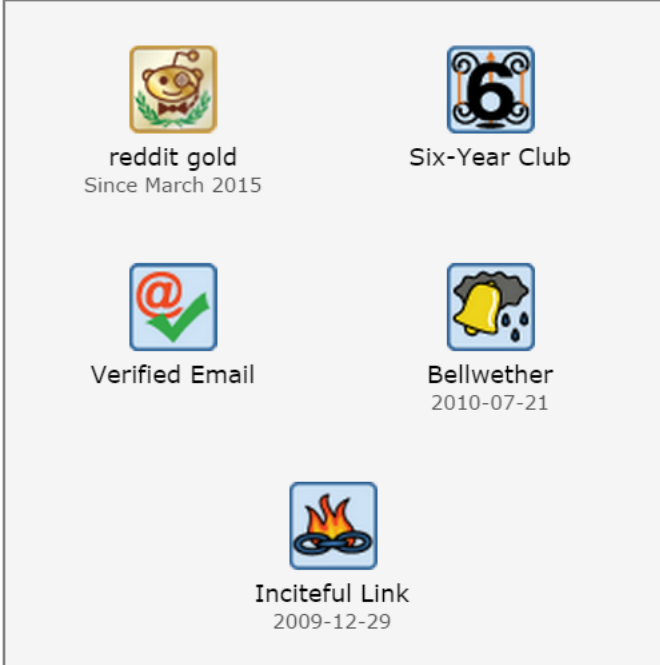115,782 link karma
20,616 comment karma

✉ send message   redditor for 6 years

MODERATOR OF

/r/conspiracy
/r/911truth
/r/realskeptics
/r/911truthers

TROPHY CASE   what's this?

reddit gold
Since March 2015

Six-Year Club

Verified Email

Bellwether
2010-07-21

Inciteful Link
2009-12-29

Source: http://www.reddit.com/user/SovereignMan/

SovereignMan has been a redditor for 6 years with 115,782 link karma and 20,616 comment karma. He is also a moderator of /r/Conspiracy, /r/911truth, /r/Realskeptics, and /r/911truthers. As evident above, he has achieved reddit gold, as well as six-year club, for being a member of Reddit for over 6 years. (Ref 8)

Flytape:

Flytape on the other hand only achieved 19,240 link karma, and 45,718 comment karma. This is significantly less than SovereignMan. Yet Flytape is also a moderator of /r/TheSurvivalGuide, /r/subredditcancer, /r/NolibsWatch, and /r/ConspiracyModerated. Just the same as SovereignMan, he is a reddit gold redditor, and differ from SovereignMan, he has only achieved the four-year club as a reddit user. (Ref 9)

I have presented two moderators above and they may not make any sense as of yet, but in the analysis below, it would make a lot more sense. Basically the types of posts and comments removed would be subjected to these two moderator's doing or that they were part of the discussion.

Observations

Firstly I'd like to say that it would've been hard to monitor /r/Conspiracy moderator post or comment removals if they did not make it transparent. I'd also like to say that I find it interesting how the /r/Conspiracy's FAQ mentions that Reddit administrators probably wouldn't like a transparent list of removed posts and comments. I would've thought that would be on the line of Reddit's beliefs of Freedom of Speech. Perhaps there is some form of censorship within Reddit, but we just don't hear about it. I'm sure some mysterious factor in the decision making of how a post or comment is removed would be to the benefit of Reddit. If too many people start challenging Reddit on the way they make decisions, its going to be out of hand very soon.

Below are a list of observations I made on removed posts that I think are worth looking at.

On Speed:

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/3444v7/no_matter_where_blacks_are_in_large_numbers/

This violates /r/Conspiracy's rule number 1, which is against derisive slurs against people's race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, social order or creed are not tolerated. I would like to say of the speed of execution. It was submitted at 12am (midnight) of 28th April 2015, and it

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This violates /r/Conspiracy's rule number 1, which is against derisive slurs against people's race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, social order or creed are not tolerated. I would like to say of the speed of execution. It was submitted at 12am (midnight) of 28th April 2015, and it

was subsequently removed about 2 hours later. This means that the moderator activity is relatively high. To further add on to the point, there are about 250 posts per day. Most moderators are also moderators for other sub-categories too. The activity from the users as well as the moderators do seem pretty high.

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/3437t6/two_cia_agents_arrested_by_minutemen_while/

This is another example of the speedy execution by the moderators. This was in fact by SovereignMan, one of the moderators I had introduced above. He shall come more into play as his activity on the moderating of /r/Conspiracy would be higher than the other moderators.

On the Mode:

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/3441uj/post_in_rnews_about_baltimore_riots_is_now_locked/

This has been removed due to the use of capital letters. According to /r/Conspiracy, rule number 6 states that cap locks could not be used.

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/341sqp/black_feminism_the_cia_and_gloria_steinem/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/33tyco/airborne_should_kill_nazis_not_train_them_what_a/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/32na3k/jade_helm_operation_expands_what_is_the_purpose/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/31zlky/this_does_not_add_up_time_to_ask_some__hard/

Pretty much all of the posts with cap locks was tackled by moderator SovereignMan. It was done very quickly and efficiently too. I suspect this was also to do with the fact that it is easy to identify violation of this rule.

Submitting Facebook Links:

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/30npa1/someones_been_predicting_tons_of_events_plane/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/33vmis/facebook_keeps_taking_down_videos_of_the_peaceful/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/343vui/feds_say_its_time_to_cut_back_on_fluoride_in/

These above posts were removed for having links to Facebook. This violates /r/Conspiracy's FAQ rule number 7 that Facebook links cannot be used. As such, if users want to post things in this subreddit, they must oblige by the rules and regulations of this sub-category's rules.

The above all seems to be very black and white moderating of user's posts and comments. I mean, after all, looking at whether it was all in capital letters or not wasn't such a hard thing to do. Yet we're stepping into dangerous territory when some things might "not" touch upon those /r/Conspiracy FAQ rules, but were also deleted. Is this part of some censorship that /r/Conspiracy has, or that Reddit has? Or does it have to do with the inability to remain neutral and enforce it's beliefs while executing and following those said rules they created?

Observations: Controversial Removals

Israel Sterilizing African Immigrants:

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/33ustn/israel_caught_forcibly_sterilizing_their/

http://www.forbes.com/sites/eliseknutsen/2013/01/28/israel-foribly-injected-african-immigrant-women-with-birth-control/

This post talks about Israel forcibly inject African immigrants with sterilizing. The actual post does not violate with any of the 10 rules by /r/Conspiracy, which is why it does left me questioning the reason for its removal. The post has also generated a lot of comments, with a total of 374 comments. I do agree that the comments were rather sensitive about Israelis and Jews, but that should have been expected, and as such, the removal process should be enforced on the comments and not the post itself. Yet in the end, the post was removed for reasons that were not mentioned. I do not see how this is in line with the beliefs of /r/Conspiracy, or Reddit, or some other violation that was indicated within the Reddit realm.

Flytape Abusing Moderator Powers:

This brings into question of whether there are some issues with /r/Conspiracy's rules. According to /r/Conspiracy rule number 10, if the post attacks the sub, user, or mods, it will be removed. Yet this does allow plausible exploitation of powers for the moderators. Are the moderators working for the users, or are the users subjected to the mercy of the moderators? It seems almost authoritarian, and one must listen to exactly what the moderators do or say. It is

also extremely subjective on the fact that the moderator may subjectively analyze that such a way is considered "offensive".
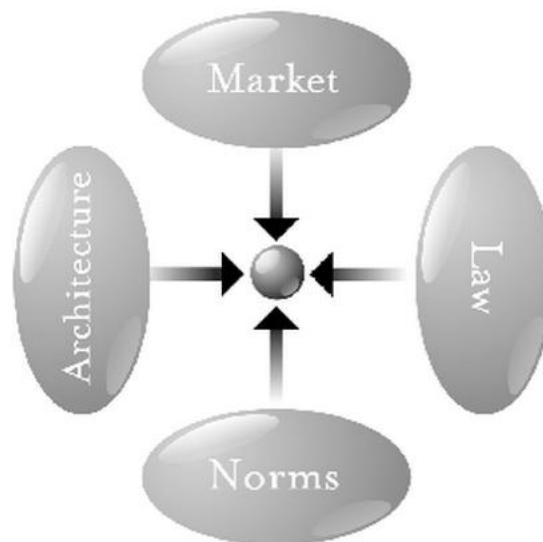
http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/31wljx/flytape_caught_trying_trade_subs_to_gain_mod/

This post says that Flytape, a moderator of /r/Conspiracy, had exploited moderator powers to gain more of it in /r/Stormfront. This indeed is exactly as it states, and very relevant for a sub-category called Conspiracies. The comments itself shows a variance of beliefs. Some seem to believe in the conspiracy, yet some believe it was not true. Once again, same as the above situation, comments within the post should be subjected to removal by the moderators if it violates the /r/Conspiracy rules. Comments in the post should not influence in the deletion of the post itself. So that means we should only look at the post. The post itself is borderline on whether it violates /r/Conspiracy's rule number 10. Rule number 10 does not allow offensive things about users, moderators, or sub. But how do we define whether it is offensive? Is the post uploader calling Flytape a troll or shill? The poster is stating that Flytape has exploited his moderator powers, and is within the realms of the /r/Conspiracy rules and regulations. I do not see how this post was offensive to the moderator. If a user could never raise the point that a moderator may be exploiting his or her power, then it just feels into the act of exploitation of power, if indeed it does exist. A parallel thought would be whether citizens have a say on what kind of politicians represents them and enforce the laws. I believe so, and for this case, I also believe it to be true.

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/31ss0n/flytape_has_abused_moderator_powers_for_the_last/

This was also another post about Flytape abusing moderator powers. It too was removed by the moderators. Though we do not know which moderator did it. Could one suspect it might be Flytape himself that did it? I think this indicates my presumptions of the way Reddit and /r/Conspiracy enforces its rules and regulations. It's never really black and white, and the authorities do have more power than they seem. Exploitations are available and used on a daily bases especially if there are plausible personal conflicts (did Flytape delete negative posts about himself? Did the /r/Conspiracy FAQ rules give Flytape too much moderator power?).

Law, Social Norms, Market, and Architecture

Source: https://www.socialtext.net/codev2/what_things_regulate

In "What Things Regulate" by Lawrence Lessig, he explains how in the digital world there are four main aspects that would control and regulate users/ people. It is by market, laws, social norms, and architecture. It becomes very interesting as all four of these major constraints would be interconnected.

How does this apply to Reddit and /r/Conspiracy? Reddit has it's own rules and reddiquette, as well as its own sub-category rules, it has a huge implementation and influence from the architecture of the website. This forms the basis of the governing of the users. Yet at the same time, these architectures would influence the social norms, as sub-categories would be enforced and self governed by moderators or creators of the sub-category. These moderators would likely form rules and regulations to mimic similar values and beliefs as Reddit's rules as well as the reddit's reddiquette. There are huge social norms implicated in the regulation of users in Reddit and its sub-categories.

I do not see a lot of law or market constraints on the dot for Reddit and its sub-categories. I feel that the laws may have provided the limited framework based on the Constitution for the endorsement of Freedom of Speech by Reddit's team, but it does not have much more implications after that. I does in a way influence architecture and social norms; since it would be due to Freedom of Speech which would allow the formation of a website that shares information and communication, as well as the social norms to believe in freedom of speech and to promote it for discussion. Though could we really say that this has huge implementation influences on the dot? I'd believe that it does not.

The market forces do not seem to be enforced here. Reddit after all, is a free website that allows anyone to register to become a user. Yes, they do earn their money from advertisements, but this in itself does not regulate the user's ability to speech. What I mean is, there is no "price" that dictates or influences whether people should do something or not. The market forces do not appear to be at large here.

I would say that the major forces at play are the websites architecture and the social norms within Reddit and /r/Conspiracy's community. Furthermore, the law influences, though minimal, do form the basis for the influence of the website's architecture and social norms.

<u>Conclusion</u>

What we could see from Reddit's subcategory /r/Conspiracy is an interesting product. We could see the objective FAQ rules placed to allow for objective moderating, but at the same time, we could also see how these objective rules could be interpreted in a subjective manner. The rules itself do seem to be persistent for plausible exploitation, especially rule number 10 which gives moderators much more power to dictate whether something is offensive or not. This does undermine Reddit's belief of Freedom of Speech. This also touches upon potential censorship and silencing of users in the digital realm.

I next looked at the influences that Reddit and /r/Conspiracy was influenced by. I believe the main influences would be from the website's architecture and the social norms within it's communities. Of course, as stated above, the fundamental laws of the country – the Constitutional laws – that gave us the right to Freedom of Speech would be the ultimate fundamental belief that they placed upon to derive in their architecture and formulation of their social norms.

References:

Ref 1: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reddit

Ref 2: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversial_Reddit_communities

Ref 3: https://www.socialtext.net/codev2/what_things_regulate

Ref 4: https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/wiki/index

Ref 5: http://www.reddit.com/rules

Ref 6: http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/wiki/faq

Ref 7:

http://www.reddit.com/r/uncensorship/search?q=flair%3Aremovelink&restrict_sr=on&sort=new

&t=all&count=425&after=t3_30flo8

Ref 8: http://www.reddit.com/user/SovereignMan/

Ref 9: http://www.reddit.com/user/Flytape/

Ref 10: https://www.socialtext.net/codev2/what_things_regulate

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/33ustn/israel_caught_forcibly_sterilizing_their/

http://www.forbes.com/sites/eliseknutsen/2013/01/28/israel-foribly-injected-african-immigrant-

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http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/33vmis/facebook_keeps_taking_down_videos_of

_the_peaceful/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/343vui/feds_say_its_time_to_cut_back_on_fluori

de_in/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/341sqp/black_feminism_the_cia_and_gloria_steinem/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/33tyco/airborne_should_kill_nazis_not_train_them_what_a/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/32na3k/jade_helm_operation_expands_what_is_the_purpose/

http://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/31zlky/this_does_not_add_up_time_to_ask_some_hard/

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https://www.socialtext.net/codev2/what_things_regulate

Reddit Logo: https://www.reddit.com/

Sub-Reddit /r/Conspiracy Logo:

https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/new/?count=250&after=t3_342ysg

Reddit Front page: https://www.reddit.com/