REDDIT QUARANTINED: CONSEQUENCES OF DEALING WITH DISTRUST IN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS THROUGH RESTRICTING ENGAGEMENT

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Extended Abstract

Large social media companies have come under increasing pressure to regulate the often abusive, misogynistic, racist and homophobic language that occurs on their platforms. Coordinated campaigns of online abuse, often blamed on the architecture and platform politics of social media sites (Massanari, 2017), have become a matter of trust for social media platforms, whose role as a facilitator of public debate has been called into question.

In response social media companies have become more active in regulating and banning particular users and channels. For example in 2018 a number of large social media companies banned the high-profile conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and his platform InfoWars from their platforms (Hearn, 2018).

But do these efforts, designed in part to reinstitute trust in the capacity of social media to be spaces of inclusivity and deliberative debate, have the desired outcome? Or, do they create unintended consequences which have the capacity to make issues of online abuse and bigotry worse?

Using affordances theory, this paper studies the revamping of the quarantining function of the social news sharing site Reddit to examine the consequences of increased regulation of content on social media sites.

Affordances is a term that has become a central analytical tool within the study of social media. As Davis and Chouinard (2016, pg. 242) argue, an "affordance refers to the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon,

structurally situated subjects". Affordance theory takes a relational approach toward technology (Faraj & Azad, 2012), examining the relational structures "between an object/technology and the user that enables or contains potential behavioural outcomes in a particular context." (Evans et al, 2016, pg. 36). Affordance theory analyses both technical and social elements of a technology, finding middle ground between technological determinism and social constructionism.

Davis and Chouinard (2016) provide categories to allow us to understand how affordances work. This framework of mechanisms and conditions define the different ways in which the functions of an artefact shape the usage of that artefact. Davis and Chouinard propose that affordances request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse.

This paper uses the mechanisms and conditions framework to examine how the revamp of the quarantine function on Reddit shaped usage of the site by affected users, as well as how users adapted their own behavior to deal with new restrictions.

Reddit announced a revamp of their quarantine function in late September 2018 (u/landoflobster, 2017). Reddit operates via 'subreddits'; discussion boards based on particular themes or topics. A quarantined subreddit cannot generate revenue, does not appear on Reddit's front page, nor on other non-subscription-based feeds. Quarantined subreddits can only be found via typing in the direct URL or searching via a search engine. Finally, when users attempt to subscribe to a quarantined subreddit a warning is displayed requiring the user to explicitly opt-in to view content. Quarantines are designed to halt participation within and growth of subreddits without banning them outright (Copland, 2018).

This paper studies the reaction to the quarantining of two large subreddits that form part of the online 'manosphere', r/Braincels and r/TheRedPill. While not explained explicitly by Reddit these subreddits were quarantined primarily due to misogynistic language and behavior. This has resulted in coordinated campaigns, in particular by the moderators of r/TheRedPill, to have the quarantine overturned.

The paper uses qualitative and quantitative data to understand the consequences of the quarantining of these two subreddits. First, a quantitative analysis of subreddit data is conducted to examine the use of these subreddits before and after the quarantine. Comprehensive submission and comment data has been collected of these two subreddits using the Reddit API. This data is used to study user activity on these subreddits prior to and post the implementation of the quarantine in order to determine whether it had its intended impact.

Secondly, qualitative analysis is conducted of posts related to the quarantining within these subreddits. Qualitative analysis in particular studies how users, moderators and commenters reacted to the quarantining and how it shaped their perception of Reddit. Furthermore this analysis examines how users adapted to the quarantine, either via changing their practices on Reddit or through shifting to new, less regulated, sites.

The paper uses an affordances framework to analyse this data in order to understand the consequences of the quarantine on these subreddits. Quarantining results in a shift in the affordances of Reddit, in this instance resulting in greater discouragement of activity on particular subreddits. The paper uses the mechanisms and conditions framework to study the response to these changing affordances, examining how shifts in the affordances of Reddit shaped behavior and activity of particular subreddits. The mechanisms and conditions framework is particularly valuable as it also allows for an understanding of how users adapt to and counteract particular site affordances, which is particularly relevant in this case.

In doing so the paper argues that while the quarantining of r/Braincels and r/TheRedPill lessoned activity and growth of these subreddits, it also resulted in significant backlash, increasing distrust in the platform. This, the paper argues, has the potential to result in long term harm, fostered primarily through growing distrust in social media platforms.

The paper theorises that the quarantining of these subreddits had two unintended consequences. First, it increased distrust in Reddit from subreddit moderators and users, leading to a breakdown of the relationship between users and the site. This has resulted in these subreddits feeling like communities under siege and separate from the broader Reddit community. This is likely to have resulted in a further refusal to become party to broader Reddit etiquette and moderation practices, practices which likely moderate abusive language.

Second, the quarantining of these subreddits has likely pushed users to external sites. In particular, following the quarantining, moderators of r/TheRedPill have pushed users to their site trp.red, while r/Braincels users are likely to move to the site incels.co. These sites have significantly less moderation that Reddit, contain less diverse views, and are more likely to contain abusive and misogynistic language. While quarantining has taken some abusive and misogynistic discourse off Reddit itself it has not eliminated it, instead pushing it to more extreme platforms.

While Reddit has discouraged particular behavior on their site, through these two actions users have adapted to the shifts in affordances shaped by this quarantining. While this is likely to have shifted behavior on Reddit, quarantining has not shifted overall behavior and language on social media sites in general. Instead it has increased distrust in Reddit and other larger social media platforms pushing users to less regulated communities. This reduces the capacity to engage users by moderating their action and behavior through requirements to suit the norms of large platforms.

Large social media companies have worked to build trust in their sites in recent years, increasingly banning and severely restricting users from participating on their sites due to abusive and misogynistic, racist and homophobic language. While this has short term benefits on particular platforms, using an affordances framework this paper argues that these actions have unintended consequences. These consequences can result in a further radicalization of actions and beliefs, furthering distrust in the online sphere.

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