



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1403

October 22, 2019

Mr. Steve Huffman
CEO & co-founder
Reddit, Inc.
420 Taylor Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Mr. Huffman,

I'm writing to you to request that you approve the quarantine appeal for the subreddit, [r/The_Donald](#). Although the initial imposition of the quarantine may have been justified, its continuation in the face of [r/The_Donald](#)'s compliance with sitewide content policies and ahead of the 2020 election amounts to ideologically motivated election interference. To this point, the same content-policy violations that led to [r/The_Donald](#)'s quarantine take place regularly and egregiously in numerous left-wing subreddits. These subreddits have faced no repercussions. As long as [r/The_Donald](#) is quarantined, this double-standard completely discredits any claim Reddit has to political-neutrality. Before expounding on my above points, I should provide some background on your website, its policies, and the subreddit, [r/The_Donald](#).

Reddit bills itself as "the front page of the internet" and consists of numerous user-moderated "subreddits" dedicated to posting about and discussing specific topics. Users can curate their newsfeeds by subscribing to various subreddits that interest them. The content in each subreddit is user-curated and community members either "upvote" or "downvote" posts which are displayed according to their popularity. Reddit's 150 million monthly pages views make it the third largest social media website in the world, drawing more internet traffic than Facebook.

[R/The_Donald](#) is a subreddit for fans of President Trump that describes itself as a "never-ending rally dedicated to the 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump." [R/The_Donald](#) was started in the run-up to the 2016 election and has since grown to a user base of 777K—making it the largest conservative political subreddit by a wide margin.

Reddit's content policy is mostly focused on blocking illegal content, but also includes prohibitions on content that "encourages or incites violence" and "threatens, harasses, or bullies or encourages others to do so." These are admirable provisions. As you explained during your Wednesday appearance before the House Energy & Commerce Committee, each subreddits' user-moderators are responsible for removing content that violates sitewide rules.

If a subreddits' user-moderators fail to enforce Reddit's content policy, the subreddit may be "quarantined" or in extreme cases, banned. When a subreddit is quarantined, amongst other things, it does not show up in sitewide searches and is excluded from sitewide content feeds. A quarantines' general effect is to render its target invisible to Reddit users who haven't already subscribed.

Reddit administrators first quarantined r/The_Donald on June 26, 2019 for "repeated rule-breaking behavior." The most recent of which consisted of "encouragement of violence towards police officers and public officials in Oregon." Interestingly, the announcement came a few weeks after Senator Ron Wyden asked you, during a joint Q&A on reddit, why you had not yet banned r/The_Donald. Additionally, just two days before the announcement, the Democratic party's media watchdog, Media Matters, ran a piece about content violating comments on r/The_Donald. The comments in question were repugnant, and I do not aim to defend them nor deny that they violated Reddit's content policy.

I would point out the indisputable fact that Reddit, with its 330 million users, was and is rife with similarly disgusting rhetoric. When such comments are posted in apolitical or left-wing subreddits, your administrative team has declined to take substantive action. Even when they have been posted at the same time and concerned the same subject matter as the comments that led to r/The_Donald's quarantine. After the controversy in Oregon, a commenter in the liberal subreddit r/Politics had the following to say about Republican legislators: "Shoot these f*ckers. In the knees. For running like pieces of sh*t." Not one of the comments that led to r/The_Donald's ban reached such a staggering level of vitriol.

R/the_Donald has its share of bad apples, but the larger r/The_Donald community appears ill-disposed towards violent and hateful speech. This is made clear by the low vote scores of the comments that led to its quarantine. The same cannot be said for certain subreddits that your administrative team has allowed to flourish. Last Friday, the second highest rated comment on the most popular post on anti-police subreddit, r/Bad_Cop_No_Donut, read, "F*ck the police, ACAB 1312, Build your guillotines." As of right now, it remains undeleted. I'm not going to beleaguer my point and list the thousands of unaddressed, rule-breaking comments from left-wing subreddits, but they are easy to find.

The effect of your continued quarantine of r/The_Donald extends beyond unfairness to conservative Reddit users. Activity on political subreddits has real world political consequences. An obvious instance would be the July 27, 2016 question and answer session then-candidate Trump held with his supporters on r/The_Donald. Political subreddits also influence other online media platforms. A 2017 study found that r/The_Donald contributed nearly 6% of all news links on Twitter. By quarantining r/The_Donald you have clogged a wellspring of conservative media content and damaged an avenue the President may well have used to communicate with his supporters ahead of the 2020 election.

Other subreddits have seen their political efforts uninterrupted. In 2016, a moderator of r/SandersForPresident posted that he had "just got off a conference call with the Bernie 2016 national staff" and relayed instructions from the campaign for effective political volunteering. Additionally, political subreddits sometimes host voter registration drives. Ahead of the 2018

midterms, a post linking to vote.gov on the liberal subreddit r/Politics received 3.4 thousand upvotes. I strongly support political communities right to organize on Reddit, but you have failed to apply Reddit's content rules in a politically impartial manner.

Mr. Huffman, moderators of r/The_Donald submitted their third quarantine appeal request on October 1, 2019. According to Reddit's content policy, quarantine appeals will be approved if they succeed in "demonstrating meaningful reform to the community." During the month prior, Reddit administrators removed just four comments from r/The_Donald that violated sitewide content policies. Considering an estimated 14,455 content violating comments were removed from the site during that same period, r/The_Donald must now be one the most law-abiding communities on all of Reddit.

Many of my Republican colleagues and I are concerned by an apparent left-wing bias in California technology companies. It's clear that the decision to quarantine r/The_Donald was based on a standard of conduct that you failed to apply to left-wing subreddits. Given the original double-standard, and r/The_Donald's demonstrated commitment to Reddit's rules, I urge you to approve their quarantine appeal request. If you deny the request and fail to provide a transparent and thorough explanation as to why, my colleagues and I will have to assume that you're biased against conservative content published on Reddit.

Mr. Huffman, during a 2018 interview with Andrew Marantz of the New Yorker, you said "I'm confident that Reddit could sway elections," followed by "We wouldn't do it, of course." I'm less certain. I can't think of a more obvious and effective way to "sway elections" than to hide the largest conservative forum on your site a year ahead of the 2020 elections. I call on you to un-quarantine r/the_Donald and steer Reddit towards a politically neutral standard.

Sincerely,

JIM BANKS



Member of Congress