

Reddit 'Rarely' Removes Defamation, Other Harmful or Offensive Content

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If given the opportunity, anyone that has been defamed on Reddit would surely “downvote” the popular website for its policy on defamation removal. According to Reddit, it is uncommon for administrators of the website – self-branded as “a source for what’s new and popular on the web” – to remove defamatory content.

This is consistent with the approach Reddit recently took in response to the leaked celebrity photos that were widely shared through the website. While certainly the distribution of private photos differs from false statements made about a person or company/organization, Reddit’s extremely pro-free speech view is reflected in how it handles both defamation and other harmful or offensive conduct.

Defamation and Reddit

In its FAQ section, Reddit states: “In light of the protections afforded to online hosts of third party content, such as Reddit, we rarely remove [defamatory] material, but we reserve the right to do so for legal or other reasons.”

Like many other websites, Reddit takes the stance that it is not well-positioned to arbitrate disputes. Alternatively, it recommends that defamed parties post the correct information on Reddit to counteract any false information.

“The reddit community is usually very supportive of such a response, and will likely vote to give the correction greater prominence than the original post,” the website reads.

The good news for victims of defamation on Reddit is that the culture of the website – a community-based approach with content gaining and losing popularity based on votes – eliminates much of the risk that a defamatory post will have the “staying power” that it may have on other websites.

For example, someone can post a completely false review on Ripoff Report, and that content will remain online indefinitely (it cannot be removed) and probably very rank highly on Google too. A rebuttal posted will often go unnoticed or unread, and it will have zero impact on the original review's ranking on Google.

On Reddit however, defamatory content – even if it were to become highly visible – is likely to fall out of sight in a matter of hours and may cause less long-term harm. Nevertheless, Reddit's devotion to free speech and allowing its members to self-govern is discomfoting to many.

And the recent celebrity nude photo leaks only gave more attention to Reddit's *laissez-faire*-esque attitude.

Celebrity leaks bring attention to Reddit's hands off approach

On August 31, 2014, the first wave of private nude celebrity photos were posted to 4chan and widely distributed throughout the internet, including via Reddit (second and third waves took place in September).

While Reddit did not host the leaked photos, users were posting links to the images in a "subreddit" originally created to discuss the leaks. This resulted in significant distribution of the private photos. According to Forbes, [the subreddit page received in excess of 250 million views](#).

Although the page was ultimately deleted, it was not because of its content or the invasion of privacy of the subjects, primarily women.

"The subreddit was shut down because users were reposting content already taken down due to valid DMCA requests, and because spammers began posting links to the images hosted on their own pay-per-click sites, or sites intended to spread malware," [Reddit CEO Yishan Wong recently told VentureBeat](#). "Both activities violate our rules and we took down the subreddit for those reasons only."

On Sept. 6, Wong published a blog post in which he expressed his disapproval of the photo theft. Yet, in this post – entitled "Every Man Is Responsible For His Own Soul" – Wong reiterated Reddit's strong pro-free speech stance and emphasis on allowing Reddit users to govern themselves.

"We uphold the ideal of free speech on reddit as much as possible not because we are legally bound to, but because we believe that you – the user – has the right to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, and that it is your responsibility to do so," Wong wrote.

Reddit's policies present challenges for harmed parties

By all means, Reddit is complying with the law. For starters, the Communications Decency Act shields the website from liability for user-submitted content. Further, Reddit does remove copyright-infringing content or photos/videos that would be considered child pornography.

But beyond that, Reddit does little else as far as content removal.

"[Critics] point out that there are subreddits devoted to sharing nude images of non-celebrity women that may have been published without their knowledge or consent," Timothy B. Lee [wrote on Vox](#). "But because these women don't have the resources of Jennifer Lawrence and Kate Upton, they aren't able to generate a blizzard of takedown requests."

(Note that a person owns the [copyright to selfies, but not to photos taken by another without an assignment](#))

Although the website is generally unwilling to remove defamation, this is not to say that administrators will never do so – especially when a harmed party can make a clear showing that the content in question is false and defamatory.

When a person has been defamed on Reddit, it may be necessary to issue a subpoena to reveal the particular poster's identity. Unfortunately, Reddit users are not required to provide a name, and email addresses are optional. Further, log data is only preserved for 90 days.

However, the IP address from which a Reddit account is created is "retain[ed] indefinitely," so the source of defamatory content can be determined. In other words, a defamed party can still legally pursue its attacker on Reddit, which could actually lead to them deleting or overwriting their posts.

In short, Reddit's hands off approach does make it difficult to have defamatory content or other harmful content such as private photos be removed from the website. Nevertheless, the website is amenable to removing harmful content when legally required to do so; plus it is possible to identify the sources of attacks and take action against them.

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