



# Its Reddit's turn The front page of the internet should be next to face Congress

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Earlier this month, the Senate Intelligence Committee's [fourth hearing](#) on social media as it pertains to foreign influence in our elections took place on Capitol Hill. Representatives from Facebook, Google, Twitter, and YouTube have sat before Congress to answer questions regarding online interference from countries like Russia, and the spread of misinformation and fake news on their social media platforms.

Missing from these hearings, however, is the [fifth most popular site](#) in the United States: [Reddit](#).

It's time Congress invites Reddit to its next hearing.

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Founded in 2006, Reddit has grown into a behemoth. With [330 million users](#), more than 138,000 active communities, and 14

billion monthly page views, there's no denying Reddit's position on the web. The site, which bills itself as the "front page of the internet," is so popular with its U.S. audience that it even [surpassed Facebook](#) to become the third most popular site in the country for a short time earlier this year, according to Alexa, the Amazon-owned web analytics company. In April, it was reported that Reddit's active user base was [now larger than](#) Twitter's.

## The case for a Congressional hearing

Aside from its ever growing numbers of users, Reddit has admitted to being targeted by foreign actors attempting to exert influence. Five months ago, Reddit CEO Steve Huffman posted the company's [2017 transparency report](#) on the site. It detailed how the company has banned hundreds of accounts they believe to be connected with Russia's [Internet Research Agency](#). That's the same Russian "troll farm" linked to many of the kinds of accounts that attempted to sow discord in the lead-up to the 2016 election. The organization has ties to Russia's intelligence agency.

Of the [944 banned](#) Reddit accounts, a few were fairly successful at gaining "karma," Reddit's metric for when a user "upvotes" a link, picture, or video submission to the site. More upvotes means more visibility on the site, and more karma for the account that submits the content. Karma signifies a prolific user of the site.

The most successful Russia-tied Reddit account presented in the company's transparency report is [u/rubinjer](#). That user received nearly 100,000 karma in about a year and a half before getting banned. Subreddits where u/rubinjer was most active include [/r/The\\_Donald](#), Reddit's controversial Donald Trump community, which boasts nearly 650,000 members. This active subreddit is

well-known for its [violent rhetoric](#), hate speech, and white supremacist content.

While we now know the details surrounding these banned accounts, the company wasn't so open at first. It wasn't until The Daily Beast [published a report](#) uncovering foreign influence on the platform that Reddit admitted to the Russian influence operation on its site, and shared what they knew with the public.

Most recently, Reddit [announced](#) that an Iranian influence operation [recently uncovered](#) to be targeting platforms like Facebook was also targeting them. In all, 143 accounts were identified as part of this operation, which Reddit said "focused on steering the narrative around subjects important to Iran, including criticism of U.S. policies in the Middle East and negative sentiment toward Saudi Arabia and Israel. They were also involved in discussions regarding Syria and ISIS."

The way Reddit works — users congregate in issue-specific communities — makes it a perfect distribution platform for misinformation campaigns and beyond. Conspiracy theories thrive. Users bounce stories around within this walled garden of other like-minded individuals. And if you're part of a specific community, those posts show up in your front page Reddit feed as if they're some sort of top story.

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The subreddit for Pizzagate, the conspiracy theory which culminated in a man firing an AR-15 in a DC pizza joint he falsely believed was harboring child sex slaves, [was banned](#) days before the incident. At the time, the community of over 20,000 people was sharing personal information about actual people they believed to be involved in something that did not exist.

But, Reddit as a right-wing conspiracy outlet didn't end there. Followers of the latest right-wing conspiracy theory, [Qanon](#), considered a descendant of Pizzagate, made Reddit their de facto home up until just last week.

Earlier this year, Reddit banned its first popular Qanon community, [/r/CBTS\\_stream](#), for inciting violence months after the group was created. Immediately after, a new subreddit, [/r/GreatAwakening](#), grew to take its place.

Regardless of how hard [/r/GreatAwakening](#)'s moderators tried to police its new community (unlike the Pizzagate and Qanon communities that were previously banned), the new subreddit of over 70,000 users was [banned just last week](#) for “inciting violence, harassment, and the dissemination of personal information.” The problems on [/r/GreatAwakening](#) just didn't arise last week though. One particularly stunning example of the issues on the subreddit stem back in April when [/r/GreatAwakening](#) mods [issued a plea](#) to the community to stop posting illicit images of children in an attempt to tie Hillary Clinton to a nonexistent child sex ring. Once again, Reddit finally decided to take action months and months after the problems persisted, long after the platform already acted as the central means to funnel the dangerous QAnon conspiracy into the mainstream.

Even before the latest right wing conspiracies, Reddit has long been plagued by toxic users fostering virulent communities. Many early users of the site were fans of /r/jailbait, a former community where redditors would share sexualized images of underage girls. The /r/jailbait subreddit even received “best of” accolades from the sites users before a [CNN segment with Anderson Cooper](#) forced the company to [ban the community](#).

Like /r/jailbait, many of the worst subreddits, like [/r/creepshots](#) and [/r/TheFapping](#) — which both existed for the purpose of sharing nonconsensual sexual images of women — were large enough that it was inconceivable that the people running Reddit were unaware of them. The subreddit [/r/incels](#), where self-proclaimed involuntary celibates stoked hatred against women with violent, pro-rape screeds, was an active community for over four years before being removed from the site. All of these subreddits were banned [only](#) after [mounting public outrage](#).

In 2014, as the seeds were being planted for the harassment campaign known as GamerGate, the subreddit /r/KotakuInAction was born in an effort to promote the movement. The subreddit would regularly target feminists and "social justice warriors" and propped up racist and sexist personalities on the far right like Milo

Yiannopoulos and Mike Cernovich. As one of the main online hubs for the movement, KotakuInAction quickly became popular.

Realizing that the community was becoming a haven for some of the internet's worst intentions, its creator, Reddit user David-me, attempted to [shut it down](#). Reddit wouldn't let him. The company's [guidelines](#) allow them to do this "when it believes it in the best interest of the community or the website... Our goal is to keep the platform alive and vibrant, as well as to ensure your community can reach people interested in that community." Basically, Reddit determined that the community was way too popular for the company to lose. It now has close to 100,000 members.

And, when someone within Reddit tries to tame the monster, the site's own users eat them alive. When Ellen Pao became CEO of the company, she attempted to make sweeping changes, like [banning revenge porn](#) outright and [closing communities](#) like [/r/shitniggers](#) and the nearly 150,000 member [/r/fatpeoplehate](#) for harassment. Then the [firing of an employee](#) popular with redditors fanned the flames to the point where there was no putting the fire out. Redditors [revolted](#), with moderators of some of the largest subreddits taking the communities private -- effectively holding the website's most popular content hostage in protest. Pao stuck around for a few more months, but faced with a myriad of death threats and harassment, in July 2015, [Pao resigned](#) as Reddit CEO.



In the Senate Intelligence Committee's most recent hearing with Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and Twitter's Jack Dorsey, a few Senators brought up [deepfakes](#), the AI technology that can convincingly manipulate video and images. It's such a concern, the U.S. Department of Defense is already looking into [ways to combat](#) malicious uses of it.

From [fake news](#) to [revenge porn](#), deepfakes are going to be an even bigger issue in the near future. The term and the problematic uses of the technology actually all began on Reddit, where a user created realistic-looking yet fake videos inserting mainstream female celebrities into porn clips. Once again, months afterward, due to increasing outcry from the public, the deepfakes community [was banned](#) from Reddit.

It's one of the most popular sites in America, and it should be obvious that Reddit and its users would be targeted by malicious actors. Yet regardless of this and the fact that some of the very problems like deepfakes were birthed from the site, Reddit hasn't even garnered a mention at Congress' hearings on social media influence operations.

The issue here is likely [demographic](#). Reddit's majority male user base skews fairly young compared to everyone and your grandma using Facebook, for example. Twitter, which by many

metrics is actually a smaller platform than Reddit, has found its niche among politicians and the media, which leads to an overestimation of its influence. It's no surprise that the Senate, [average age 62](#), would overlook such an influential site for mostly young men.

Days after the 2016 election, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg [downplayed the company's possible role](#) in influencing the way Americans voted. "To think it influenced the election in any way is a pretty crazy idea," Zuckerberg said. Less than a year later, Zuckerberg's tune has drastically changed. As the U.S. government [released evidence](#) that sometimes completely contradicted Facebook's statements on the role they played in the election, the company started to accept that its platform was used as a tool by malicious actors to sow discord and possibly even sway voters. Facebook executives would attend its first of many Senate hearings on the issue in [October of 2017](#).

"After the election, I made a comment that I thought the idea misinformation on Facebook changed the outcome of the election was a crazy idea. Calling that crazy was dismissive and I regret it," Zuckerberg said in a [Facebook post](#) nearly 10 months after

the election of Donald Trump. "This is too important an issue to be dismissive."

It's time for Reddit and its current CEO and co-founder Steve Huffman to take these issues more seriously as well. Congress pushed Zuckerberg to act. Perhaps they can invite Reddit to the next set of hearings and be the push that Reddit needs, too.

**WATCH: Cenk Uygur has some advice for dealing with "fake news"**