

Community Autonomy and Centralised Governance: A Textual Case Study Of The Reddit API Virtual Sit-In

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Abstract: Many content creators in online communities experience a power imbalance because of centralised social media governance while also focusing on profit. This paper investigates the Reddit API protest as a notable case of digital activism in the context of centralised online community governance. This coordinated protest aimed to disrupt Reddit's operations, draw attention to the perceived injustices of the API changes, and pressure the platform to reconsider its policies. To determine how the Reddit API virtual sit-in demonstrated the difficulties of reconciling community autonomy with a perceived power imbalance, an interpretivist worldview was adopted. A total of 139 posts from June to July 2023 in nine subreddits were analysed using deductive, followed by inductive, thematic analysis. Data analysis revealed three main themes, namely planned disruption, collective action and solidarity, platform response and perceived success. The results reveal that while the protest showcased considerable community mobilisation, Reddit's centralised governance structure limited the success of the virtual sit-in. The study contributes to discussions on digital activism and platform governance, suggesting that without decentralised models that empower user communities, digital protests may primarily serve as expressions of discontent rather than as mechanisms for noticeable changes.

Keywords: Community Autonomy, Digital Activism, Online Community Governance, Platform Governance, Virtual Sit-in

1. Introduction

The growing influence of social media platforms in public discourse has raised concerns about how they maintain a balance between user community autonomy and centralisation. As these platforms have become hubs for activism and collective action, questions have arisen about how much users can influence outcomes in corporate-controlled digital settings (Jhaver, Frey & Zhang 2023). The Reddit API protest in June 2023 occurred by means of a virtual sit-in, where thousands of subreddits initiated a blackout in response to restrictive changes affecting accessibility and community management. The protest is an example of the restrictions online communities face when their interests conflict with platform policy (Germain 2023). This coordinated protest aimed to disrupt Reddit's operations, draw attention to the perceived injustices of the API changes, and pressure the platform to reconsider its policies (Pequeño IV 2023). Using a textual case study, this study examines the Reddit API protest as an example of digital activism in centralised online community governance. In doing so, the following research question was addressed: How did the Reddit API virtual sit-in demonstrate the challenges of balancing community autonomy with centralised platform governance?

To answer the study's research question, a total of 139 posts from June to July 2023 across nine subreddits were analysed through deductive, followed by inductive, thematic analysis. The results provide a better understanding of the broader implications of platform governance for digital community empowerment and the future of digital activism. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, a theoretical background in terms of centralised social media governance and digital activism is provided. Thereafter, the research context, method and results are explained and discussed. The paper ends with a conclusion.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Centralised Social Media Governance

Through its platform, social media has created millions of online communities, for example Facebook groups, Pinterest boards, subreddits on Reddit and channel-based communities on YouTube (Raouna 2024). Over the years, social media platforms have evolved from mere distributors of user-generated content to active producers of content (Van Dijck 2013), which is supported by the presence of these online communities. Van Dijck, De Waal and Poell (2018) argue that the "platformisation" of society not only disrupts traditional media landscapes but also raises critical questions about who is responsible for upholding values, particularly as the dynamics of power shift are in favour of large digital platforms. Also, independent creators in these communities face increased competition and reduced visibility (Van Dijck et al. 2018).

Aside from a power imbalance, online communities on social media have evolved into a digital platform economy, as many social media corporations operate with the primary goal of generating revenue. Although

these corporations have seen significant financial success as a result of their involvement in social media, creators who contribute content and engage on these platforms have largely missed out on these profits (Kopf 2020). Many of these corporations govern their social media platforms centrally with rules and regulations in the form of content policies that outline permissible behaviour and terms of service agreements known as user agreements. Social media networks also monitor content with algorithmic moderation, hired content moderators, and user reporting (Reuber & Fischer 2021). Centralised social media networks are criticised for data handling, lack of openness, and censorship (Sphynyx Labs 2024).

Zeng, Kaye and Bondy (2022) explain online governance as the strategies and mechanisms used by digital platforms, including social media, to regulate and manage content and user interactions. This governance may include both conventional content moderation techniques, such as content removal, and more advanced approaches such as visibility moderation, wherein platforms adjust the dissemination of user-generated content through algorithmic or regulatory mechanisms. Therefore, the focus is not only on what content is removed but also on how content is amplified or suppressed to influence which voices and perspectives are most visible on the platform (Zeng et al. 2022).

How social media platforms are centrally governed often leads to an imbalance between the power of the social media corporations and the content creators. To illustrate, unfair copyright enforcement issues on YouTube have resulted in numerous false accusations, with long-term consequences for creators (Hallinan, Reynolds, & Rothenstein 2024). Content creators must adapt to changing algorithms and policies, which impact their brand identity, communication styles, and activities (Arriagada & Ibáñez 2020; Esparcia, Caro-Castaño & Martinez 2023). However, a shift from centralised to decentralised governance on social media platforms is increasingly being considered as a means of distributing power more evenly across different levels. This decentralisation is intended to empower online communities, encourage innovation, and improve user experiences while also addressing governance challenges such as accountability and coordination across different levels (Jhaver et al. 2023). Examples include Steemit, Mastodon, and Peepeth (Sphynyx Labs 2024). This study focuses on Redditt, a centralised and governed community social media platform with some decentralised moderation at the subreddit level, but not for the platform's overall structure and governance (Fiesler et al. 2018).

2.2 Digital Activism

Scholars and journalists alike have recently paid close attention to digital activism. Nonetheless, a clear and universally accepted definition and scope of digital activism have yet to emerge (Ozkula 2021; Esparcia et al. 2023). Due to its broad scope and conceptual challenges, digital activism can be treated as an umbrella term that includes a wide range of actions (Ozkula 2021). Examples of types of actions include but are not limited to online petitions, social media campaigns, hacktivism, hashtag activism, the coordination and mobilisation of offline protests through digital platforms, digital documentation of events, the creation and dissemination of political memes and parodies, virtual sit-ins, data activism, and the use of digital tools for grassroots surveillance and reporting (Ozkula 2021; Esparcia et al. 2023). Social media amplifies digital activism by allowing users to connect their personal experiences to larger causes, as well as encouraging support and organisation in online communities (Greijdanus et al. 2020).

The concept of a virtual sit-in first emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the Internet became a more popular tool for activism. The concept was inspired by the sit-ins from the U.S. civil rights movement, which were a form of nonviolent civil disobedience (Weber 2013) and can thus be referred to as electronic civil disobedience (Rouse 2013). Early examples include actions by groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT), which organised virtual sit-ins against institutions and governments as a form of protest against issues such as globalisation and human rights violations (Apostol & Thompson 2019). Virtual sit-ins work on the same principles as physical sit-ins, with disruption serving as a key mechanism for amplifying the protesters' message (Weber 2013; Rouse 2013). However, the effectiveness of virtual sit-ins, like other forms of digital activism, depends on the level of participation and the ability to mobilise support (Zahira et al. 2018). While the idea of digital activism is broad (Ozkula, 2021; Esparcia et al. 2023), this paper focuses primarily on a virtual sit-in that occurred on Reddit in June 2023.

3. The Research Context

This study focuses on Redditt as an example of centralised online community governance. Reddit is a social content aggregator founded by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian in 2005. Users can share and discuss links, text, images, and videos. Votes determine posts' visibility in the platform's many "subreddits." Subreddits have

their own rules and moderators and cover specific topics (Sawicki & Ganzha 2024). Upvoted posts are promoted, while downvoted posts are degraded. Reddit's comment sections allow users to discuss, share, offer insights, aggregate diverse content, and have real-time conversations on many topics (Anderson 2015). Research by Singer et al. (2014) indicates that Reddit has evolved from being a primary entry point to the Web into a more “self-referential” online community that promotes and enhances its own user-generated content, such as images and text, rather than relying on external sources. Most discussions on Reddit are accessible to the public, in that anyone can view the content regardless of whether they have a Reddit account, except for those in private subreddits (Proferes et al. 2021).

Reddit's online community governance is reflected in what Fiesler et al. (2018: 72) refer to as “an ecosystem of community-created rules.” Behaviour on Reddit is regulated through three main methods namely a user agreement and content policy, a set of community norms and specific rules for individual subreddits (Fiesler et al. 2018: 72). Subreddit moderation is mostly handled by volunteer moderators who enforce both subreddit community standards and sitewide rules and can delete posts, comments, and media that violate subreddit rules and ban violators (Thach et al. 2022).

On 18 April 2023, Reddit announced through its official communication channel that it would implement significant modifications to its Application Programming Interface (API), a framework of protocols and tools facilitating inter-software communication, thereby allowing developers to incorporate functionalities from one system into another (Preibisch 2018). As of 1 July 2023, the updated terms allowed applications making fewer than 100 queries per minute per OAuth ID to continue using the free tier, while those without OAuth registration were restricted to 10 queries per minute. This policy affected over 90% of Reddit applications. This resulted in wide-spread protest among Reddit subreddits (Mehta 2023; Simpson 2023). The coordinated effort was one of the largest acts of collective action on Reddit, with over 9 000 subreddits participating at its peak, demonstrating widespread discontent and the power of online community governance (Simpson 2023). This protest was largely organised by subreddit moderators who communicated with one another across multiple communities. They used private moderator forums, direct messages, and public posts to rally support and coordinate the timing of the blackout (Simpson 2023).

4. Method

This qualitative study investigates the Reddit API protest through a textual case study. To address the research question, an interpretivist worldview was adopted for a deductive, followed by an inductive thematic analysis of Reddit posts about the protest. Thematic analysis is an approach to qualitative analysis to uncover and present reoccurring patterns or themes in data (Braun & Clarke 2006). By focusing on predetermined themes related to virtual sit-ins, the analysis first aimed to identify patterns and insights that are relevant to the study's research question, after which the data was used to gain more insight. Data about the API protests were purposively sampled from the following subreddits in the public domain by manually searching for information about the protest in the search bar of each subreddit (see Pascoe 2021). The subreddits selected for this analysis have relevance to the Reddit API protest, are large communities, and reflect different perspectives of content creators. Table 1 below depicts the subreddits and number of posts analysed for this study.

Table 1: The subreddits and number of posts analysed for this study

Subreddit And Purpose	No of Members and Posts Analysed	Subreddit And Purpose	No of Members and Posts Analysed
r/reddithelp (a forum for assistance on Reddit)	26 000 members 13 posts	r/OutOfTheLoop (information about what is happening on Redditt)	3.4 million members 26 posts
r/technology (news and discussions regarding the use of technology and related issues)	17 million members 17 posts	r/webdev (all topics about web development)	2.6 million members 6 posts
r/redditdev (discussion of Reddit's API and Reddit API clients.)	76 000 members 12 posts	r/gaming (gaming forum)	44 million members 3 posts

Subreddit And Purpose	No of Members and Posts Analysed	Subreddit And Purpose	No of Members and Posts Analysed
r/AskReddit (members may ask thought-provoking questions)	49 million members 36 posts	r/ModSupport (an official admin-moderated community)	102 000 members 24 posts
r/reddit (updates, announcements and news about Redditt)	228 000 members 2 posts		
Total: 139 posts			

Data analysis was facilitated by the NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which assisted in organising and coding the data (Edwards-Jones 2014). Trustworthiness of the results was enhanced by following Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

5. Results

Three themes emerged during the deductive thematic analysis as follows, which were also analysed inductively to uncover the deeper meaning of the data.

5.1 Theme 1: Planned Disruption

This theme relates to the planned disruption as part of the Reddit API protest. The protest was a well-coordinated effort to disrupt the platform’s normal operations. The following subthemes and codes became evident.

Table 2: Planned disruption, subthemes and codes

Subthemes	Codes
Announcement of blackout	Informing the Subreddit community
	Voting for the protest action
Reluctance to participate	Sceptism

The subreddits involved in the protest announced the blackout to their communities well in advance, providing a clear explanation of the issues surrounding the API changes and seeking feedback from members. For example, moderators from subreddits such as r/technology and r/ModSupport consulted their members before deciding to go dark, stating, *“The moderators have been discussing our participation, and yesterday we made a post asking for the community’s opinion on going dark.”* This form of communication is essential in digital activism as it builds transparency and trust among participants, which is critical for mobilisation (Greijdanus et al. 2020).

Another code that emerged was the practice of voting on whether or not to participate in the protest. Many subreddits, including r/AskReddit and r/webdev, engaged in a democratic process by allowing their members to vote on whether the subreddit should participate in the blackout. Statements like *“We wanted to ensure that whatever action we take is largely supported by our community”* reflect the decentralised decision-making process in these subreddits, which stands in contrast to the centralised governance of Reddit itself. This type of bottom-up decision-making is important for digital protests because it encourages a sense of ownership and commitment among participants (Ozkula 2021). Ozkula (2021) contends that collective decision-making strengthens the legitimacy and reach of digital activism. By allowing users to influence how the protest unfolded, the moderators ensured greater community engagement and solidarity (Zahira et al. 2018).

Despite widespread support, not all members believed the blackout worked. Some users doubted a temporary subreddit shutdown would change anything. Comments such as *“Going dark for two days isn’t a protest, it’s*

taking a break” reflect this cynicism, which is not uncommon in digital activism. In this regard, Greijdanus et al. (2020) argue that the effectiveness of digital protests often depends on the perception that they can bring about tangible outcomes, and when that perception is absent, participants may be less likely to engage fully. The community disagreement highlights a key challenge in digital activism: maintaining momentum and making protests more than symbolic (Esparcia et al. 2023).

5.2 Theme 2: Collective Action and Solidarity

This theme is related to collective action and solidarity, which are important aspects of virtual sit-ins. The subreddits used a coordinated blackout to protest Reddit's API changes, with thousands of communities going "dark" by making their subreddits private or restricting access to members only. The following subthemes and codes became evident.

Table 3: Collective action and solidarity, subthemes and codes

Subthemes	Codes
Collective action	Community participation
Symbolic use of cultural references	Posting images of John Oliver Not safe for work (NSFW) Videos changed to text only
Caution	Impact on Redditt community

The level of participation highlights the collective discontent felt across the community and reflects the ability of Reddit users to unite for a common cause. Statements such as *“This put the community in a huge rage, and if the API is being killed, we’re taking down Reddit with us. So join us in our effort to revert this change,”* point out the shared sense of purpose that drove the protest. As Greijdanus et al. (2020) argue, collective action is a cornerstone of effective digital activism, and the ability of a movement to sustain participation is key to its success. In this case, the coordination between subreddit moderators and the broader community reflected a strong sense of solidarity (Simpson 2023).

During the blackout, symbolic cultural references, such as changing subreddit themes to feature John Oliver, were used as parody. Digital activism often uses humour and cultural symbols to gain momentum and visibility (Esparcia et al. 2023). As one user noted: *“In protest they changed the topic of the subreddit to only be john oliver. Thats not what we expected when we joined the subreddit.”* Many subreddits also labelled themselves *“not safe for work (NSFW)”*, which affected Reddit’s advertising revenue, while subreddits sharing videos changed to *“text only.”*

Discussions of ongoing actions beyond the initial two-day blackout helped to strengthen solidarity. Moderators emphasised that the protest was part of a larger, ongoing effort, with one stating: *“The two-day blackout isn't the goal, and it's not the end. We'll use the community and buzz we've built as a tool for further action.”* This commitment is similar to nonviolent resistance movements in physical protests, in which collective action grows over time to increase pressure on governing authorities (Rouse 2013). However, some subreddits expressed concern, particularly about the impact of the blackout on their own communities. Moderators and users discussed the long-term implications of continuing the protest, particularly how API changes would affect moderation tools and the functionality of personal scripts used by developers and moderators. One user stated: *“I want to know if I can still use the API, without cost, on personal scripts that I use for moderation. I don't want to spend 300 hours more on a script that you'll just take away after giving double talk.”*

This tension between immediate protest actions and the practical implications for community management illustrates the undercurrents of solidarity in digital activism (Ozkula 2021).

5.3 Theme 3: Platform Response and Perceived Success

This theme deals with the platform’s response and perceived success. For virtual sit-ins to succeed, the platform’s response must reflect user demands, or at least acknowledge them meaningfully. The following subthemes and codes became evident.

Table 4: Platform response and perceived success

Subthemes	Codes
Platform’s response	Addressing the community Response to blackout
Platform taking control	Replacing mod teams Supermods lack of power
Perceived success	Unmet demands Perceived futility

The platform’s response emerged as a key subtheme, highlighting Reddit’s varied approaches to addressing the community and reasserting control. Initially Reddit tried to clarify the API changes, explaining the limitations and costs involved, with statements such as: *“There’s been a lot of confusion over what these changes mean, and I want to highlight what these changes mean for moderators and developers.”* The platform also allowed selective exceptions for accessibility-related third-party apps. However, they stood by their stance on profitability and strategic control, which remained uncompromised despite user pushback: *“We’re Sticking With API Changes, Despite Subreddits Going Dark.”* Greijdanus et al. (2020) argue that when platforms engage only selectively or make token gestures, it can alienate users and deepen mistrust. Reddit’s response, which involved limited dialogue followed by stringent policies, reflects a form of corporate governance that prioritises long-term platform goals over community alignment. As the blackout continued, Reddit administrators took decisive action against moderators who refused to reopen subreddits, threatening to replace them with “scab” moderators or Reddit-appointed admins. As one user stated: *“Any subreddit of significance that was still private was told in no uncertain terms to ‘return to normal function, or we’ll replace the mod teams entirely.’”* This demonstrates how centralised platforms can wield power to reassert order when facing disruptive user actions. Platform control versus community autonomy is increasingly significant in digital activism studies, as it reveals the limitations users face on centralised platforms (Jhaver et al. 2023).

Also, a revealing insight from the protest was the perceived limited power held by so-called “supermods” or “power moderators”, namely users who manage a large number of subreddits. One user explained: *“We found out that the ‘supermods’ or ‘power moderators’, i.e. users who moderate huge number of subreddits, had way less power over the admins than they thought they did, and also are not opinion leaders or able to influence the wants of the userbase – a painful realisation for them.”* This experience highlighted the hierarchical nature of platform governance, where perceived influence in the user community does not equate to power over administrative decisions (Zeng et al. 2022).

Perceived success is another subtheme that emerged in participants’ reflections, showing mixed opinions on whether the protest achieved its goals. The core demands of the protest were largely unmet, as Reddit maintained its API pricing model, leading to the closure of numerous third-party applications relied upon by users and moderators alike. User comments such as *“The changes happened... most third-party apps died out. Nothing happened with the protest because it was handled horribly”*, reveals the feeling of disillusionment among protest participants, who felt that their efforts were either ignored or inadequately organised. In this regard, Greijdanus et al. (2020) highlight the importance of structured organisation in digital activism, arguing that without cohesive strategies and consistent messaging, protests are vulnerable to fragmentation and diminished impact.

Another sentiment expressed among users was the perceived futility of user protests against Reddit’s corporate interests. A statement such as *“It really hammered home in no uncertain terms that this isn’t a democracy from their point of view. Customers will adapt to new changes ‘or else’”* reflects a broader realisation that Reddit, as

a private organisation, operates with a governance model that does not prioritise user input in the decision-making process (Zeng et al. 2022).

6. Discussion

Through a textual case study, this qualitative study investigated the Reddit API protest as an example of digital activism in a centrally governed online platform. The research question was addressed through three key themes that reveal the difficulties and limitations faced by user-led digital activism efforts on centralised social media platforms. The Reddit API virtual sit-in illustrates the complex tension between user community autonomy and centralised platform governance, highlighting the limitations of digital activism in corporate-owned spaces. While users can mobilise collective action and gain visibility, their influence is constrained by the platform's power to control, redirect, or suppress dissenting actions (Zeng et al. 2022; Ozkula 2021). The protest revealed that Reddit's centralised governance framework prioritises corporate objectives, such as profitability and control over platform operations, above the demands of its user base (Esparcia et al. 2023). Even those with perceived authority found their influence diminished by the platform's administrative decisions (Jhaver et al. 2023). This imbalance suggests that digital activism on centralised platforms often serves more to signal discontent than to effect substantial change. There is thus a need for governance models that grant users meaningful influence if true community autonomy is to be achieved (Greijdanus et al. 2020; Weber 2013).

The results reveal that while the Reddit API protest mobilised considerable community action, it also highlighted the constraints that centralised governance imposes on community autonomy. Digital activism in corporate platforms faces limitations, as platforms can choose to suppress, ignore, or counter user-led protests if they conflict with corporate objectives. The results contribute to the broader literature on digital activism, showing that while platforms can facilitate community-driven movements, true autonomy is difficult to achieve in centralised, profit-oriented environments (Esparcia et al. 2023; Greijdanus et al. 2020).

7. Conclusion

The Reddit API protest offers valuable insights into an example of how digital activism on a centralised platform may remain limited in its ability to drive substantial change. As was shown with the textual case study, this limitation is because of the tension between community autonomy and corporate governance. The results reveal that while user communities can organise, disrupt, and mobilise for collective action, their influence is constrained by the platform's centralised power structure. As argued in the literature, user-led movements in corporate-owned spaces often struggle to achieve substantial change due to platform priorities that favour business interests over user demands. Hence, when online communities want greater autonomy and influence, decentralised or alternative platforms could be a more effective setting. The study is not without limitations in that the results can only be generalised to the Reddit social media platform. Future research could expand on the study's insights by examining protests on decentralised platforms or by comparing cases across various social media environments.

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