

# REDDIT WRANGLES REINS FROM USERS AT A RISK

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Reddit became one of the most visited websites in the world on the backs of users devoted to the online bulletin board where people could post just about anything. Reddit benefits from a free workforce of volunteers who moderate discussion forums known as "subreddits," on topics running a gamut from science and religion to white supremacy and woman-bashing.

US President Barack Obama and billionaire Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates are among those who have taken part in Ask Me Anything (AMA) question-and-answer sessions that are an attention-getting staple at the online bulletin board. Yet, since its launch a decade ago in Massachusetts, users have taken the Reddit reins, straying at times into "dark" lanes littered with hateful, offensive and borderline illegal content.

Reddit co-founder Steve "spez" Huffman stepped back in as chief executive this week and set out to tame the wild side of the site. "If you are going to behave

badly, someone is going to eventually take away your privilege," independent Internet technology analyst Rob Enderle said of moves to clamp down at Reddit. "You can't behave with impunity indefinitely."

### 'The Trolls are Winning'

Reddit is grappling with a challenge faced by social networks including Facebook and Twitter when it comes to stifling nastiness while avoiding alienating users on whom its fortunes depend. "Neither Alexis nor I created Reddit to be a bastion of free speech, but rather as a place where open and honest discussion can happen," Huffman said in a message announcing his recent AMA. Reddit is a for-profit business operated as a subsidiary of Advance Publications.

Its forums are moderated by volunteers who tend to be passionate about the bulletin board being an online venue for saying whatever users want no matter how inane, outrageous or offensive. In his AMA, Huffman reached out for feedback

on constrictions that Reddit is considering placing on the kinds of content that can be posted. The move comes in the wake of the departure of Ellen Pao, who headed the company until disgruntled users demanded her departure.

A number of people on the site posted sexist and inflammatory comments about Pao. "Balancing free expression with privacy and the protection of participants has always been a challenge for open-content platforms on the Internet," Pao said this week in an editorial published in The Washington Post. "But that balancing act is getting harder. The trolls are winning."

### Revenge Porn Banned

Early this year, Reddit banned non-consensual pornography referred to as revenge porn because it typically involves former romantic partners who have not given permission for sharing content. Reddit last month ditched five subreddit forums, including one devoted to making fun of fat people, under terms of a new

anti-harassment policy. Other content Reddit is thinking of banning includes spam, people's private information and anything that incites harm or violence, or could be considered abusive or bullying. "Reddit is the Internet, and it exhibits all the good, the bad and the ugly of the Internet," Pao said in her editorial. "It has been fighting this harassment in the trenches."

Pornography and content that "offends the sense of decency" will be sectioned off in a previously-established Not Safe For Work (NSFW) zone that Reddit users will be able to opt into at their discretion, according to Huffman. "Basically, Reddit got the huge number of users it now wants to monetize by using 'free speech!' as an excuse to let every user run wild," a user with the screen name Mrs Eccentric commented. Efforts to now clean Reddit up and make it more attractive to advertisers are "making the users scream bloody murder," the post contended.

### Pao Takes the Heat

Reddit moderator Matthew Amadea said during a forum on KQED public radio in San Francisco that he signed the a petition demanding Pao's ouster because of ramped-up commercialization under her administration. "Reddit was founded as a site completely run by users and would not sell out," Amadea said. "When you commercialize it, you are putting more ads into it and you are pushing some sort of an agenda."

Reddit, which boasted about 170 million users before the turmoil in recent months, describes itself as a venue for real-time journalism and "the front page of the Internet". About three quarters of those using Reddit are said to be young men. "The site lends itself to a kind of boyism that, at best, could be off-putting to women," David Weinberger, a senior researcher at Harvard University's Berkman Center for the Internet and Society, said during the KQED forum. —AFP

# APPLE WATCH NEEDS TIME WEARABLES UNDERPERFORM THE HYPE

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Is Apple Watch a dud? Nearly three months after the launch of Apple's fashionably smart wrist wear, some analysts say it's not a mainstream mega-hit. But others see promise in its popularity with Internet-savvy young people. Media outlets last week jumped on a study by research firm Slice Intelligence suggesting that, based on a large sampling of email receipts in the United States, orders for Apple Watch have plunged 90 percent since the week that the wearable computing gadget made its debut.

The estimate did not factor in data about Apple Watch sales at real-world stores. It remains to be seen whether the famously tight-lipped technology company will provide insights into Apple Watch sales when it releases a quarterly earnings report on Tuesday. While not sounding an alarm, BMO Capital Markets analysts put out word to investors that they were "disappointed" and reduced their estimate for Apple Watch sales in the coming year. They reasoned that the product was "nice to have but not a necessity, and is a bit hard to use."

Richard Windsor at Edison Investment Research said that even if Slice is way off the mark about the drop in Apple Watch orders, it was clear the smartwatch has sold far below even conservative expectations. "My single biggest disappointment when the Apple Watch launched was Apple's failure to come up with a compelling use to which the device could be put," Windsor said. "I think that this failing is the single biggest reason why the device is underperforming and why wearables in general continue to massively underperform the hype."

### Go-To Gift

However, Cantor Fitzgerald experts believe Apple Watch will be a "go-to gift" during the year-end holiday season and become the best selling new product in Apple's history. Apple Watch was the first new product line introduced by the culture-changing company behind iPhone, iPod, and Macintosh computers since 2010. Global Equities Research managing director Trip Chowdhry has estimated Apple could sell 20 million to 25 million of the watches in the final three months of this year.

Jack Gold, President of J Gold Associates, a research firm, said that it would be no surprise if Apple Watch sales momentum fell after the hype of it hitting the market subsided. "The Apple lovers are going to buy things as soon as they come out," Gold told AFP. "The rest of the market though, the mass market, really waits for more definition around 'What can this do for me?'"

So far no smartwatch, even a fashionably sophisticated offering by Apple, has hit the market accompanied by uses so compelling that people swarm to snap them up, according to Gold. "Why do I spend \$400 for a screen on my wrist that allows me to do basically the same thing that my phone does?" he asked rhetorically.

### Wearables Without a Cause

This is not just a challenge facing Apple. Rather, it is a gauntlet thrown down before every maker of smartwatches or other forms of what has become known as "wearable computing," according to Kantar Worldpanel ComTech

### Long-Term Play

Measuring Apple's success in the sector for now could come down to how much profit it makes per smartwatch and how big a chunk of the market it commands, analysts said. Kantar research indicated that iPhone owners are more interested in wearable computing overall and more willing to spend money on gadgets, signalling that Apple could be more successful in the sector than rivals. Eight analysts consulted by AFP anticipated that Apple Watch sales this quarter would range from three million to five million units, and most expected sales by the end of the year to tally slightly less than 20



**WARSAW:** Marcin Iwinski, co-founder of CD Projekt Red company which created computer game "The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt" is pictured at the headquarters of the company on June 2, 2015. —AFP

## POLISH VIDEO GAME 'THE WITCHER' ENCHANTS WORLD

**WARSAW:** Poland's new ambassador is a scar-faced hit man armed with two swords and potions against monsters and dragons. His name is Geralt, hero of a Polish role-playing video game bewitching the world. "The Witcher" is the brainchild of Warsaw-based CD Projekt Red, one of a growing number of cutting-edge Polish IT firms out to dominate global gaming. It sold four million copies of the game worldwide at euro 60 (\$67) a piece in the couple of weeks after its May release. The earlier two instalments in the Witcher series have sold some eight million copies since hitting the market in 2007 and 2011.

"The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is one of the best games ever made," said website Gamespot of the game that is the top seller in most of the 109 countries where it was released. "They created the largest open world in the history of video games and filled it with realistic dialogue and characters that are full of life," said leading Polish game developer Pawel Miechowski of the game's creators. "Plus the graphics are staggering," the 32-year-old told AFP.

The series was even mentioned by US President Barack Obama during a visit to Warsaw last year, after he received the second instalment as a symbolic gift to smash dated stereotypes of Poland as a dreary, grey, ex-Communist country of vodka and horse-drawn carts. "I confess, I'm not very good at video games, but I've been told that it is a great example of Poland's place in the new global economy," he said at the time.

CD Projekt Red cofounder Marcin Iwinski attributes the success of Polish video games to Eastern European sensibility: "We bring something new to the table, a breath of fresh air, creativity." The country's video-game industry is one of the biggest in Europe, according to Daniel Sadowski, cofounder of the Nitreale Games studio and an instructor at the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology. "There are around 500 independent video game studios in Poland.

Every year around 100 Polish games hit the global market," he said.

### 'Sky's the Limit'

The Warsaw-based "11 bit" studios has the hallmarks of an IT start-up. Around 40 video game developers sit in the open-plan office located in a 1970s building by a noisy expressway in an industrial part of town. They are all men, most of them bearded, and under 30. Dressed in faded T-shirts and jeans, they are busy coding, drawing and testing ideas next to walls covered in project sketches, cartoons, and calendars with game release dates.

Their last project, "This War of Mine," was the first role-playing video game to show war from the perspective of civilians trying to survive in a besieged city, as opposed to elite soldiers. The game, which came out late last year, won dozens of prizes and topped a weekly sales chart compiled by the digital video games distribution platform Steam. "We're hearing that our game has opened the eyes of many people in Russia," said Miechowski. "Because of the propaganda, they don't realise that there are civilians in these war zones who have to survive under extreme conditions. Our game was a kind of catharsis for them."

At one point in May, the various versions of The Witcher took up three of the 10 slots on the Steam chart, while another Polish game - "Dying Light" by the Techland studio in the western city of Wroclaw - came in at spot number five. "The success is a result of our national character, among other things: for us nothing's impossible. This determination to make something that no one else has made yet is crucial in video games," said Miechowski. "We learnt how to make video games step by step, and how to reach players with a universal message," added Iwinski. "With The Witcher 3, we made one of the best games in the world and now we're aiming for the top. The sky's the limit!" —AFP

## HACKERS THREATEN TO LEAK ASHLEY MADISON CLIENTS

Hackers claim to have personal details of more than 37 million cheating spouses on dating website Ashley Madison and have threatened to release nude photos and sexual fantasies of the site's clients unless it is shut down, blog KrebsOnSecurity reported. Ashley Madison's Canadian parent, Avid Life Media, confirmed the breach on its systems and said it had since secured its site and was working with law enforcement agencies to try to trace those behind the attack.

The hackers, who call themselves The Impact Team, leaked snippets of the compromised data online and warned they would release customers' real names, profiles, nude photos, credit card details and "secret sexual fantasies" unless their demands were met, Krebs said. Avid Life did not disclose what information was stolen. The hackers demanded the closure of another of Avid Life Media's sites, sugar-daddy site "Established Men," but did not target the company's "CougarLife" site, which caters for women members looking for "a young stud".

Ashley Madison, which uses the slogan

"Life is short. Have an affair," has been planning to raise up to \$200 million through an initial public offering on the London Stock Exchange. "We apologize for this unprovoked and criminal intrusion into our customers' information," Avid Life said, adding that the hackers left behind posts and images on the website detailing their demands. The unauthorised posts have since been removed.

The breach comes about two months after dating site Adult FriendFinder was compromised. That site has an estimated 64 million members. The Impact Team, in a screengrab showing on the Krebs blog, said it had taken over Avid Life Media systems including customer databases, source code, financial records and emails. "Shutting down AM (Ashley Madison) and EM (Established Men) will cost you, but non-compliance will cost you more," the hackers said. They said users who had paid a fee to Avid Life to have their personal data permanently deleted had been lied to and the company had retained records, including credit card information. —Reuters

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Wondering if we are alone in the universe has engaged minds through the ages. Add to the list Russian billionaire Yuri Milner, who announced yesterday that he plans to spend \$100 million to explore the idea. Using some of the world's largest radio telescopes, a team of scientists handpicked by Milner will oversee an initiative he calls Breakthrough Listen, a 10-year search for radio signals that could indicate the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe.

"It's the most interesting technological question of our day," Milner said in an interview, noting that he became fascinated by the notion of extra-terrestrial life after reading astrophysicist Carl Sagan's "Intelligent Life in the Universe" as a 10-year-old in Moscow. His funds to bankroll the project came from savvy early investments in startups such as Facebook Inc. Milner's motivation is his belief that other civilizations could teach us how to handle challenges such as allocating natural resources. "If we're alone, we need to cherish what we have," he said. "The message is, the universe has no backup."

Scientists said the project dwarfs anything else in the field, known as the Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence. Globally, less than \$2

million annually is spent on SETI, said Dan Werthimer, an adviser to Milner's project and the astrophysicist who directs the SETI@home project affiliated with the University of California in Berkeley. Today, due to technology improvements, including in computing power and

al million, and to search 10 times more sky than in the early 1990s. But any signals the scientists detect will likely have been created years ago, perhaps even centuries or millennia earlier. Radio signals take four years simply to travel between Earth and the nearest star outside

scopes, including at Australia's Parkes Observatory in New South Wales and the Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank, West Virginia. Milner plans to book about two months a year at each site, a boon to scientists who normally might get two days a year on the telescopes.

The team, led by scientists such as Peter Worden, who until earlier this year directed the NASA Ames Research Center, will organize the radio signals they find, make the data public, and examine the data for patterns. The goal lies less in understanding the signals than in establishing whether they were created by intelligent life rather than natural phenomena. Scientists say the fact that humans have developed radio signaling makes it a good bet that others may use it as well.

"It doesn't tell you anything about the civilization, but it tells you a civilization is there," said Frank Drake, who with Carl Sagan sent the first physical message into space in 1972, the Pioneer plaques on board the Pioneer 10 US spacecraft. An adviser to Breakthrough Listen, Drake is also chairman emeritus of the SETI Institute. In addition to checking for radio signals, Breakthrough Listen will hunt for light-based signals using a telescope at the Lick Observatory in California. —Agencies



**LONDON:** Russian entrepreneur and co-founder of the Breakthrough Prize Yuri Milner (left), and British scientist Stephen Hawking attend a press conference yesterday. —AFP

telescope sensitivity, \$100 million will go much farther than in the early 1990s, the last time SETI had significant funding, scientists said.

The advances allow scientists to monitor several billion radio frequencies at a time, instead of sever-

our solar system.

In 10 years, with his \$100 million, Milner figures scientists can listen for radio transmissions in the Milky Way galaxy, plus the 100 nearest galaxies. One of the biggest costs lies in booking time at radio tele-