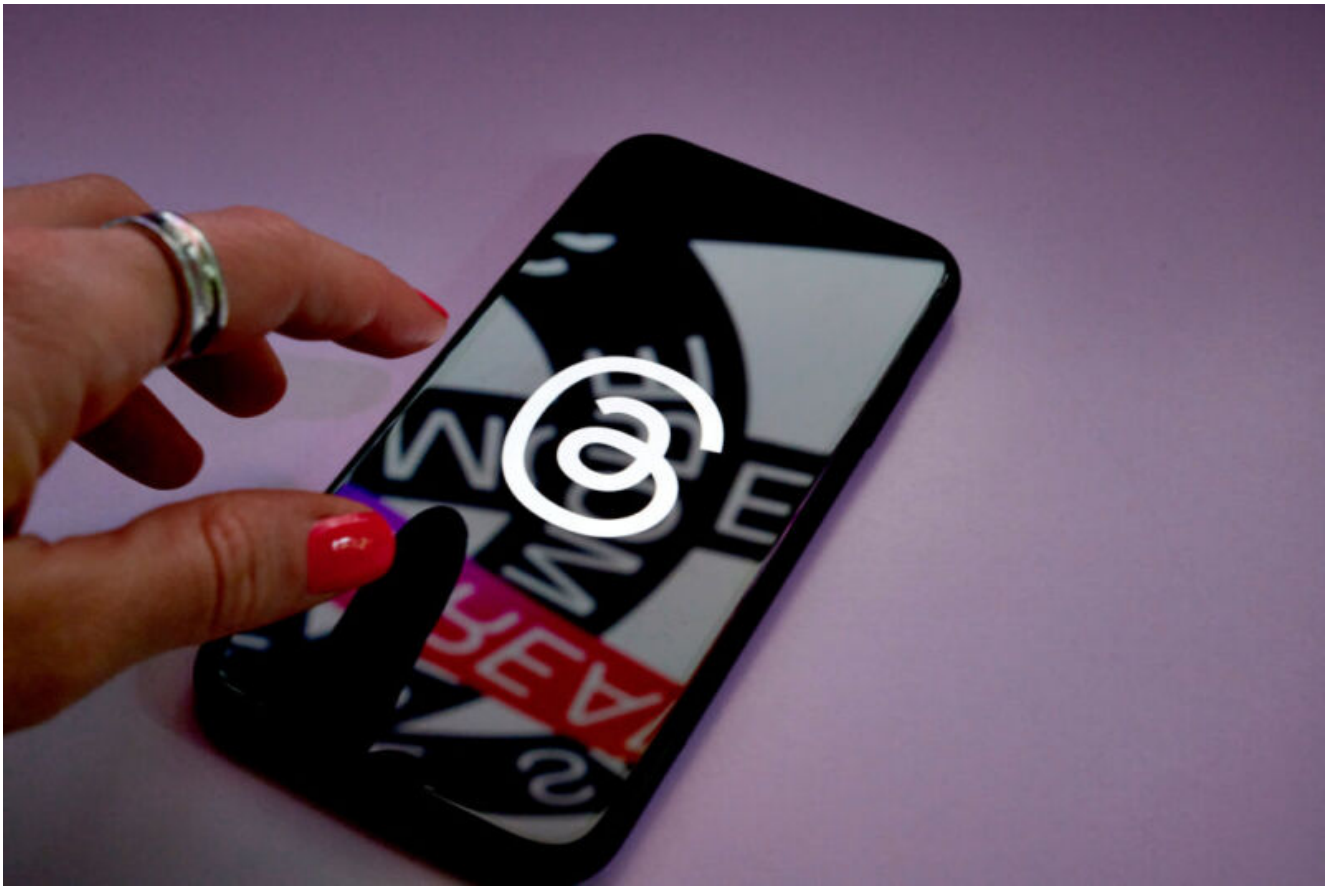
Threads usage drops as Meta blocks VPN access in EU [Updated]



reader comments

125 with

[Update: Top10VPN's head of research, Simon Migliano, told Ars that "demand for VPN services is significantly up in a handful of major EU countries, such as Italy (26 percent), France (19 percent) and Sweden (20 percent), and up around 12 percent across the bloc as a whole since the launch of Threads on July 5 compared to the daily average over the 30 days prior. Other countries with significant spikes include Croatia (20 percent), Denmark (23 percent), Greece (22 percent) and Luxembourg (21 percent)." Compared to its neighbors, "privacy

conscious” Germany’s VPN “demand is fairly flat” and only up by 5 percent, Migliano said.

Migliano also indicated that it seemed likely that Meta may not be blocking all VPN traffic.

“It’s understandable that Meta would try to block VPN traffic to Threads in the hope of improving their standing with EU regulators looking at their wider business model,” Migliano told Ars. “It does however feel like it’s more for PR purposes than a serious attempt to lock out all EU users keen enough to use a VPN to access Threads. While Meta may well have gone for the low-hanging fruit of blocking easy-to-identify IP ranges, such as those from data centres, it would be much more resource-intensive to identify and block obfuscated VPN traffic for example.”]

This month, Meta’s new Twitter-alternative Threads launched in 100 countries, but not in the European Union, due to potential conflicts between the app’s vast data collection and the EU’s strict data privacy laws. Immediately, reports emerged that some EU users persisted in downloading Threads anyway—by hiding their location and accessing the app via a virtual private network, or VPN.

Advertisement
Now, Meta has confirmed that it has taken measures to block VPN access to Threads in the EU.

“Threads is not currently available in most countries in Europe, and we’ve taken additional steps to prevent people based there from accessing it at this time,” a Meta spokesperson told TechCrunch. “Europe continues to be an incredibly important market for Meta, and we hope to make Threads available here in the future.”

Many EU Threads users have taken to Twitter to confirm that their access has indeed been cut off.

Ars could not immediately reach Meta for further comment.

Threads collects a lot of private information about its users, including health and financial data, precise location, search history, and browsing history, for the purpose of targeting ads. In the EU, not only does the General Data Protection Regulation require minimization of data collection for limited purposes, but the Digital Markets Act (DMA) was specifically designed to make it much harder for tech giants, known as gatekeepers, to track user activity to target ads. Meta could face fines of up to 10 percent of its global revenue for failing to comply with the DMA and up to 20 percent for repeat violations.

Meta was one of seven platforms designated as a potential gatekeeper under the DMA. Because of that, the European Commission has said its apps must comply with the DMA within six months of a quickly approaching September 6 deadline, when the EU plans to officially designate all gatekeepers.

Until Meta figures out how to bring its apps into compliance with the DMA, Threads will likely remain inaccessible to users in many European countries. This could stunt the app's growth, which started off explosive but has since tapered off, according to data firms Sensor Tower and Similarweb.

Advertisement

Sensor Tower reported that on Monday and Tuesday this week, Threads' "number of daily active users were down about 20 percent from Saturday, and the time spent for [each] user was down 50 percent, from 20 minutes to 10 minutes," CNBC reported.

Similarweb's findings painted a slightly starker picture, reporting that daily active users were down by more than 25 percent from Threads' peak on July 7 to Monday. Like Sensor Tower, Similarweb also found that average usage time has fallen by 50 percent, "dropping from about 20 minutes on July

6 to just over 8 minutes on July 10," CNBC reported.

It's currently unclear how many EU users were accessing Threads during the app's peak, making it hard to determine how big an impact blocking VPN access in the EU has had on Threads' traffic. But Similarweb's senior insights manager, David Carr, told CNBC that he attributes the dropoff to a trend showing that, despite "intense" initial interest in Threads, "not every user has made a habit of visiting Threads as often as they might other social apps."

Meanwhile, Twitter's Elon Musk continues to claim that under Twitter's new metric measuring user seconds per day, Twitter usage is going up. That's despite reports that Twitter traffic was down while Threads' traffic surged.

"Looks like this platform may see all-time high device user seconds usage this week," Musk tweeted.

While Threads gets a lot of heat over collecting a wide range of sensitive information—see how Threads' data collection compares with Twitter and other Twitter alternatives—a report from Top10VPN found that Threads "pales in comparison to Twitter when it comes to tracking its users across the Internet."

Top10VPN could not immediately be reached for comment.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1953967