Why disabled users joined the Reddit blackout

The Reddit blackout is in its second day as more than 8,000 communities go dark to protest the tech giant's plans to implement API pricing that users say is too high, too fast. It's created a ripple effect from bored people not being able to access r/relationships to academics missing r/AskHistorians. In the process, it's also highlighted an issue that often lurks in the darkness: accessibility.

Subreddits like r/blind, r/HardofHearing, and r/deaf are relatively small, but their concerns loom large in the protest. Some disabled users fear the API changes will threaten their ability to access the site. Because both Reddit's website and its official app fall short of their needs, they rely on third-party applications to navigate Reddit. Those third-party applications can't afford the API fees, and some, such as Apollo, are already announcing that they're shutting down.

Accessibility, broadly, includes the implementation of features that allow disabled people to access a built environment, whether physical or digital. One in four Americans are disabled and have varying access needs, such as ramps, ASL interpreters, captions for videos, plain language information, and the ability to modify how text is displayed. Greater accessibility often benefits people in ways they don't even notice. Enlarged text or changed contrast are access features, for example, and fans of dark mode can thank the disability community.

"If Reddit was a restaurant third party apps are franchises. We can get a burger from Reddit directly or from a franchise.

The official Reddit location is at the top of a cliff. Disabled people can't get there. Reddit is charging franchise fees so high nobody else can afford to offer burgers," reads a message from the moderators of r/blind, one of the subreddits that joined the blackout.

In a conversation with *The Verge*, Norbert Rum, who founded r/blind in 2008, pointed out several places where Reddit's official app falls short of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), the set of standards used to guide developers in the creation of accessible apps and websites.

One is huge: people relying on keyboard-only navigation can't actually use the app, a critical issue for people who rely on voice control. Reddit's official app is also not compatible with screen readers, which read content to blind and low-vision users and also provide navigational information.

Reddit's official app is also not compatible with screen readers

In an AMA, CEO Steve Huffman responded to a user query about accessibility with: "For our own apps, there is no excuse. We will do better." When asked for more information, Reddit spokesperson Tim Rathschmidt said the company is "exploring a number of things at the moment" but did not provide a timeline for features such as alt text for media and interactive controls.

Many third-party apps either have explicit accessibility features or integrate smoothly with iOS or Android's built-in accessibility options. Apple, in particular, is famous for its accessible iPhone features, such as VoiceOver, enabling accessibility shortcuts, and working seamlessly with Bluetooth hearing aids. These features can be extremely valuable for disabled people who can't access Reddit on desktop or simply prefer mobile due to its affordability or portability.

Reddit's culture relies on unpaid community moderators, and

many of the mods, in turn, rely on tools in third-party apps with accessibility features that Reddit's official app doesn't have. In a post on r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnns, moderator vibratoryblurriness discussed handling the bulk of the moderation as a disabled trans person who would be unable to continue without third-party apps.

In response to user outcry, Reddit introduced exemptions for developers of "non-commercial apps that address accessibility needs." Rathschmidt confirmed that two apps, Dystopia and RedReader, have received exemptions, and the company is in talks with "a number of developers focused on accessibility." In the meantime, he said developers can contact Reddit to learn more about exemptions. Meanwhile, in Friday's AMA with Reddit's CEO, MostlyBlindGamer commented: "You ask for what you consider to be a fair price for access to your API, yet you expect developers to provide accessible alternatives to your apps for free."

Reddit appears to be making a distinction between accessibility apps and apps with access features, which might not necessarily qualify for exemptions; Rathschmidt did not respond to a request for clarification on exemption decisions. This kind of distinction often leads to absurd outcomes — for example, a dilemma where the state will fund a $3,000 bulky purpose-built item but not an iPad with a communication app, which would be more effective. But beyond the sheer inefficiency, siloing disabled people to a handful of sanctioned apps is a tiny echo of how disabled people have been pushed out of public life time and time again.

Disabled users say the most obvious fix to their accessibility woes is an overhaul of the official app

Disabled users say the most obvious fix to their accessibility woes is an overhaul of the official app. This could include fixes to address outstanding access issues, such as the need for alternate text and clearly labeled buttons that can

interact with screen readers appropriately, and might integrate options to address cognitive disabilities and physical impairments such as Parkinson’s or tremors, which can make it very hard to use apps without making mistakes. In the short term, they want their beloved apps to be able to continue operating, which would require revisiting the API pricing and the timeline for implementation.

As for r/blind, it remains dark in protest, with a bitter twist: thanks to access conflicts, only a sighted person could actually flip the switch that set the community to private.

https://www.theverge.com/2023/6/13/23759761/reddit-disability-accessibility-blackout-api-blind