Reddit tackles ‘revenge porn’ and celebrity nudes

In a move to protect user privacy and curb revenge porn, social media site Reddit has banned naked photos that are shared on its site without the consent of the subject of the photo.

The updated policy, which will come into effect on March 10, is partly in response to leaked celebrity nude scandal of 2014, “The Fappening”, where hundreds of images of celebrities were allegedly stolen and reposted on sites such as 4chan and Reddit.

Actors Jennifer Lawrence and Kate Upton were among those who had revealing photos spread across the internet, with Lawrence describing the scandal as a “sex crime”. So will this policy change at Reddit stop it from happening again?

Taking down non-consensual nudes

Reddit is filing the new statement under “involuntary pornography” in its privacy policy:

If you believe that someone has submitted, without your permission, to reddit a link to a photograph, video, or digital image of you in a state of nudity or engaged in any act of sexual conduct, please contact us (contact@reddit.com), and we will expedite its removal.

It’s a gesture towards respecting privacy, but the rule is a red herring. Reddit hosts links, not images or videos. Just because something is unlinked from Reddit doesn’t mean it vanishes completely. Taking something off the internet is “like trying to take pee out of a swimming pool”.

By the time an unwanted image is discovered, countless other people may have already seen it, saved it, or reposted it elsewhere on the internet. Reddit’s solution is a step in the right direction, but doesn’t yet do enough to solve the wider problems that come with the uploading of non-consensual nudes.

Putting the onus on the subject of the image to flag it for removal – not the site, its audience or the person posting it – shifts the responsibility to the person potentially being harmed. It’s a reactionary policy that only addresses the symptom of the problem, not its cause.

But some parts of Reddit already strive for a culture of consent.

Reddit is working to become a responsible and business as well as a popular internet portal. Eva Blue/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Verifying nudes: the case of Gonewild

On subreddit (i.e. a moderated page dedicated to a particular topic) Gonewild, which features exhibitionists showing off their nude photos, a verification system (warning, some links NSFW) is in place, in an effort to only show photos from willing participants.

The verification process involves contributors handwriting a sign with their Reddit username, the date and a mention of Gonewild on a piece of paper, then photographing themselves naked, holding the sign, from three different angles. It’s intended to prove that the images have been submitted intentionally, for the purpose of being shown off in that particular context.

Redditors who have successfully been verified have an icon appear next to their username on Gonewild, communicating their consent to the audience.
It’s not a perfect system. Images can still be digitally manipulated, and despite advice on how best to remain anonymous while posting nudes, women have been *outed and shamed* as a result of being recognised from Gonewild posts.

But even with occasional blunders, Gonewild’s verification system is a proactive solution that aims to develop the subreddit into a safe space for those who are comfortable sharing images of their naked body.

**Social media regulation**

The Gonewild example shows that digital communities can be effective in regulating online content.

When something goes wrong on social media, there is a tendency to turn towards the platform and demand new regulatory systems. Google’s solution to unwanted nudes is far more severe than Reddit’s: from 23 March, it will *censor any sexually explicit content on Blogger* by making all blogs with adult material “private”, effectively erasing them from view.

However, we have a strange relationship with these “top-down” forms of regulation. We rarely read the Terms of Service or the End User License Agreement, and the “flags” provided on social media platforms tend to *simplify what should be a complex regulatory process*.

In contrast, norms and regulatory practices developed within a digital community over a period of time can be directly responsive to the specific needs of a community, while also signalling best practice to the rest of a social media platform.

Advances in platform regulation are essential. But it is important to recognise that community-led forms of regulation also offer innovative, effective solutions to the problem of content regulation online.

**The future of nudes on Reddit**

Now that Reddit has received *$50 million in venture capital funding*, it has a responsibility to be a good investment by attracting advertisers who want to reach Reddit’s burgeoning user base.

And while in 2014, *men were twice as likely to use Reddit than women*, this moment is an opportunity to appeal to a much broader demographic.

Allowing Redditors to step in when they feel their privacy has been violated is a solid start, but it will require a concerted effort from the platform to ensure its statement against revenge porn and non-consensual nudes translates into a culture of consent and respect.

According to Gonewild moderator xs51, “*the more comfortable and positive this place is, the more participation there will be*. And the more participation, the more advertising revenue that will follow for Reddit’s owners.

As Reddit grows, it’s up to both the platform and its users to act like the kind of community they want to be.