

Will I Lose My Job? Federal Workers Flock to Reddit for Answers.

The online forum's pseudonymity lets them vent, share information and find solace. Unpaid moderators, like David Carson, are working overtime to keep up.



By [Kashmir Hill](#)

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On March 4, a Trump appointee at the Department of Veterans Affairs circulated a memo to senior leadership. The agency, it said, would “move out aggressively” to improve efficiency, with an “initial objective” of cutting the work force to 2019 levels.

The next morning, someone posted [a copy](#) of this “reduction in force” memo to a Reddit group called [VeteransAffairs](#), an online community of 19,000 members. The copy was difficult to follow, a sequence of photos taken of the memo on a screen, but the message was clear enough: Some 80,000 jobs would be cut.

Why you can't say “orange” in r/VeteransAffairs

Kashmir Hill interviewed the subreddit moderator about the challenges of keeping his community apolitical.

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Questions and comments poured in, some bewildered, some frantic. The agency had half a million employees at hospitals, clinics, call lines and regional benefit offices that served veterans across the country. Who would be fired? Was this the end of the V.A.'s medical research? How would this affect wait times for medical appointments?

No one had solid answers, just informed speculation. Livelihoods and veterans' well-being were at stake, so the vibe was somber. But there was still room for dark humor.

“We gotta pay for Greenland somehow,” one person joked.

Reddit, a bare-bones social media site organized around more than 100,000 niche communities called subreddits, has long catered to people with quirky shared interests, whether [Bitcoin](#), [fly-fishing](#) or [photos of Keanu Reeves being awesome](#).

It is unlike other social media platforms. Instagram and TikTok offer videos and influencers; Reddit is text-heavy and aggressively unsuited to building star power. Facebook and LinkedIn require real names; anonymity reigns on Reddit, minimizing egos and consequences.

The Atlantic recently deemed Reddit possibly “[the best platform on a junky web](#).” As other social media sites have fallen prey to [A.I. slop](#) and incessant pleas to “like and subscribe,” Reddit has become one of the last places on the internet with authentically human information, community and advice.

Editors’ Picks



Their Influencer Parents Used Them as Content. Are They Being Used Again Now?

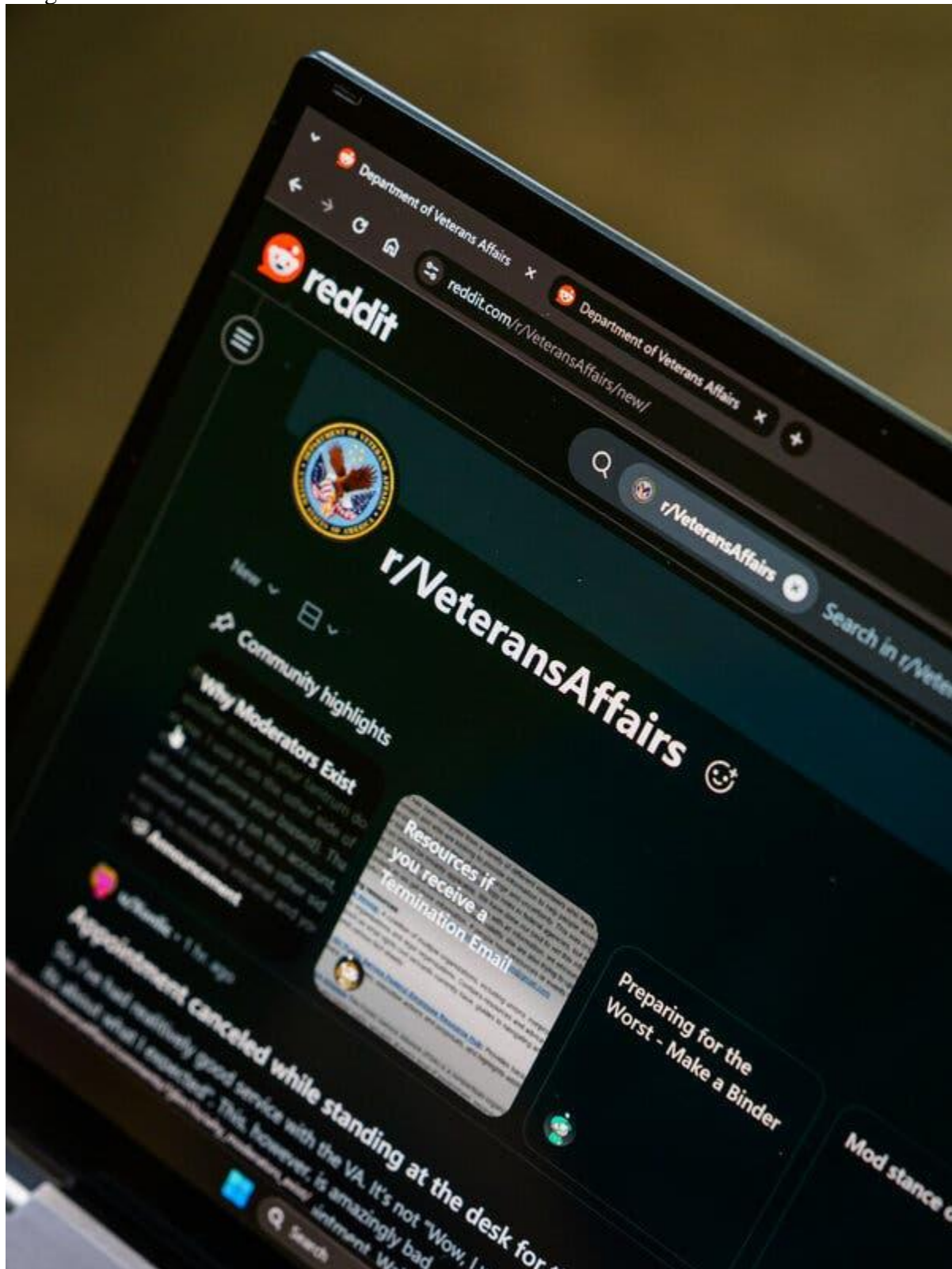


These Jackets Are Fire



Help! I Booked the Wrong Hotel Dates. Why Can't I Get My Money Back?

Image



The VeteransAffairs subreddit, one of several for federal employees, has 19,000 members.Credit...William DeShazer for The New York Times

For government workers, it has been a lifeline in recent months. With the Trump administration's rapid downsizing of the federal bureaucracy, subreddits where government workers previously posted the occasional tale about a Zoom meeting mishap or health plan question have become crowded forums for fears, anxieties and tidbits of intra-agency observation. On one subreddit, [FedNews](#), government employees have been relaying updates about layoffs, a new \$1 limit on government credit cards and "what did you accomplish last week" emails. It has drawn an influx of [millions of visitors](#) since January, according to internal statistics shared by the subreddit's creator.

"These individual subreddits let people find niches that work really well for them," said Sarah Gilbert, a researcher at Cornell University who focuses on online communities. "That's happening on FedNews, where people are using that space to come together and talk to other people who are experiencing similar trauma."

A participant on FedNews recently wrote a post [saying](#) a supervisor had told employees to stop "leaking" information on Reddit. "DON'T STOP, the people deserve to know," added the author, who, like almost all Reddit users, employed a pseudonymous online handle.

(The Department of Veterans Affairs did not respond to a request for comment.)

Not using your real name makes it easier to share information or vent frustrations without further imperiling one's career prospects. But anonymity can also breed misinformation, misbehavior and vitriol.

That's where people like David Carson come in. Mr. Carson, 53, an Army veteran and former employee of the V.A. who lives in Mount Pleasant, Tenn., is one of Reddit's more than 60,000 moderators. These volunteers do a tremendous amount of content moderation work that other social media giants contract out. The work of unpaid moderators like Mr. Carson has made it possible for Reddit to shine in this moment of political tumult.

"Reddit is a community run by people like me focused on people like me," Mr. Carson said.

The Front Page of the Internet

Reddit is 20 years old, which makes it ancient in internet years. It started out as a place to share interesting information and has remained essentially that ever since. Anyone can create a subreddit, becoming its first moderator. Anyone can visit or join it, unless it's made private.

"Each community on Reddit has its own topic, its own rules, its own moderators and, in many cases, its own in-jokes and culture," said Galen Weld, a doctoral student at the University of Washington who has conducted research on Reddit, as well as done consulting work for the company.

What people want to share can sometimes be distasteful. Reddit earned notoriety in the past for communities devoted to revenge porn, videos of people's deaths and other toxic content. But the site has [tamed its worst impulses](#) (and most devious moderators) by disbanding subreddits that consistently violate [rules](#) the company established in 2015 against harassment and inappropriate behavior.

Image



Mr. Carson spends hours a day keeping his subreddit focused on issues related to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Credit...Michael A. McCoy for The New York Times
Reddit, which [went public last year](#), is now one of the most visited sites on the internet, with more than 100 million daily active users and \$1.3 billion in revenue, according to the company's most recent financial filing. It may seem chaotic to a first-time visitor, sent there by a search engine. Its homepage is a random collection of news articles, funny photos and unfamiliar shorthand like AIO ("[Am I Overreacting?](#)"). But the individual subreddits can feel intimate and welcoming.

Each of these subreddits, whether about [home repair](#), [romantasy](#) or [Dungeons and Dragons maps](#), is unique, and each has distinct rules, decided by its moderators. Want to chat with people who have decided life is better without kids? Join [ChildFree](#). Parents are welcome, but only if they regret their choices. Enjoy schadenfreude? Try [LeopardsAteMyFace](#). That community has been sharing anecdotes about Trump voters who immediately suffered from his policy decisions, but it forbids stories about actual animal attacks.

A New Rule: No Politics

On the VeteransAffairs subreddit, there are two overriding rules: Stay on topic, and be respectful. That means no personal attacks and no politics.

Are you a federal worker? We want to hear from you.

The Times would like to hear about your experience as a federal worker under the second Trump administration. We may reach out about your submission, but we will not publish any part of your response without contacting you first.

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When the subreddit's creator tapped Mr. Carson to take over the channel a decade ago, politics were allowed. But in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, Mr. Carson and his co-moderator instituted a ban on partisan political talk after commenters began getting too heated.

"People were pointing fingers and name-calling and being abrasive and insulting," Mr. Carson said. "We're trying to create a community that embraces people."

Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in combat, Mr. Carson receives disability benefits from the V.A. He also teaches English literature part time at a community college outside Nashville. He enjoys seeing his students' reaction when he shows up on the first day wearing motorcycle leathers and a "goatee that comes down to my belly."

His schedule is flexible, allowing him time to moderate the VeteransAffairs subreddit. For many years, that amounted to an hour or two a day. But in recent months, the daily commitment ballooned to six or more hours, he said.

"Every spare minute, I have Reddit pulled up on my phone," Mr. Carson said. "If I'm in the car with my wife, I'm sitting in the passenger seat and moderating the subreddit. After my wife goes to bed, I'll sit down and watch TV, and while I'm watching TV, I'm moderating the subreddit."

Image



“We’re trying to create a community that embraces people,” Mr. Carson said.Credit...William DeShazer for The New York Times

The constant time spent on his phone was “irritating,” said his wife, Stacey, who is also a veteran, “until I realized exactly what he was doing.”

To help with the surge in activity, Mr. Carson and his co-moderator, whose real name Mr. Carson doesn’t know, recently recruited two new moderators: one a veteran and the other a clinical pharmacist employed by the V.A.

On a recent weekday morning, Mr. Carson logged into Reddit and checked his moderator queue, which had a list of more than 1,000 posts and comments. He started reading each one, removing any not directly related to the Veterans Affairs Department.

It’s time-consuming. Some people write “dissertations,” Mr. Carson said, and if the post includes a link, he clicks through to make sure the information is pertinent. “Then you got to research the website to say, OK, is this website reliable?” he said. If the site has extreme partisan leanings or unclear provenance, he’ll remove the post.

“The moderator’s job is not just about preventing abuse or removing the bad behavior,” said Eshwar Chandrasekharan, a computer science professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who has studied Reddit. “They also make it easy to find the good stuff.”

Mr. Carson always starts with content flagged for review, either by the community’s users or by an automated filtering tool. The tool, AutoModerator, looks for inappropriate language, problem users who have been flagged by other moderators and words that violate the subreddit’s “no politics” rule, including “Musk,” “Trump,” “DOGE” and “orange.”

Mr. Carson himself has strong political feelings. Expressing them has gotten him into trouble in the past. He lost his job as a claims examiner at the V.A. in 2017 in part because of a Facebook post he had written with the hashtag #AssassinateTrump, according to an administrative judge’s ruling.

He was angry with the government at the time. The V.A. had transferred him from Tennessee to Colorado, and living apart from his wife and children for two years exacerbated his PTSD. Writing about his frustration with the agency on social media was cathartic, he said. But his colleagues found the posts threatening. Containing obscenities and ominous hypotheticals, they were a tenor of post he would quickly remove from his subreddit now.

After he was fired, Mr. Carson moved back to Tennessee and continued moderating the subreddit, grateful to still be able to share his expertise. He had come to think of helping veterans with their benefits as more than a job. It was his purpose.

“We’re trying to create a safe, helpful and respectful community,” Mr. Carson said. He is always on the lookout for mentions of suicidal thoughts — which he, too, has experienced — and prioritizes reaching out to those people to offer help.

On this morning, AutoModerator had flagged a comment: It claimed that spyware had been installed on all computers tapped into by the Department of Government Efficiency, the group led by Elon Musk to cut the federal bureaucracy. Mr. Carson removed the comment.

“We allow conversations that focus on facts and provide evidence,” he said. “But even then, it still has to be relevant to the V.A.” The spyware comment, he said, was a “supposition.”

‘You’re Not Alone’

When federal workers received an email last month telling them to list five things they had accomplished the previous week, someone posted a poll on the VeteransAffairs subreddit for V.A. colleagues: [“Did you reply to the email?”](#)

A majority of respondents said they hadn’t.

That kind of information is “helpful and enlightening,” said Bruce, a V.A. employee in Salt Lake City who has been checking the subreddit every day.

Bruce, who asked not to use his full name to protect his employment, said that there had been little official communication from his regional office, and that Reddit had helped to fill the information vacuum.

“It just gives you an idea of what other people at the V.A. are going through, that you’re not alone,” said Bruce, who until now had thought of Reddit mainly as a place to go for sports news.

People can post on Reddit “and get this really quick individualized feedback from an actual human,” said Dr. Gilbert, the researcher at Cornell. On an internet awash with bots and A.I.-generated content, that distinguishes the site.

But that could change. Last year, Reddit signed licensing deals with Google and OpenAI, allowing the site’s content to be used to train artificial intelligence like ChatGPT. The authentically human writings from Reddit will help A.I. sound more human, Dr. Gilbert said, making it harder for Reddit and its moderators to weed out bots in the future.

“You might not end up getting the same kind of human, high-quality information that people are going to Reddit to find,” Dr. Gilbert said.

Facilitating human connection and networking is why Mr. Carson spends so much time pruning the conversational hedges of his Reddit domain.

“People find us when they need us,” Mr. Carson said. “Just now, people need us more than ever.”

Audio produced by Adrienne Hurst.

Kashmir Hill writes about technology and how it is changing people's everyday lives with a particular focus on privacy. She has been covering technology for more than a decade. [More about Kashmir Hill](#)

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