

Joe Rogan dispute shows Spotify limits of being hands off

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Neil Young poses for a portrait at Lost Planet Editorial in Santa Monica, Calif. on Sept. 9, 2019. Young isn't satisfied with urging his fellow musicians to join him in taking their music off the streaming service Spotify. Now he wants company employees to quit their jobs before it "eats up your soul." In a message on his website Monday, Feb. 7, 2022, Young said company CEO Daniel Ek is a bigger problem than popular podcaster Joe Rogan. Credit: Photo by Rebecca Cabage/Invision/AP, File

Like Facebook and Twitter, Spotify is learning the limits of deflecting responsibility for what is said on its platform.

Podcasting has sprouted as an industry with few standards about policing offensive or misleading content. That has left Spotify trying to figure out how to keep podcaster Joe Rogan's millions of devoted fans happy without further alienating artists and listeners angry about him amplifying vaccine skeptics and using racial slurs.

Spotify wants to be viewed as a [technology platform](#) that has limited liability for the material that others create and stream through its service—a position shared by many social-media companies. But experts say that is difficult to defend after Spotify reportedly spent \$100 million to become the sole distributor of "The Joe Rogan Experience."

"They are acting like they should get treated as a platform—when they are acting like a media company," said Jennifer Grygiel, a Syracuse University communications professor and an expert on social media. "You can't have it every way you want."

In an effort to expand scrutiny beyond musicians and listeners, folk-rock singer Neil Young urged Spotify employees late Monday to quit "before it eats up your soul." Last week, [Young pulled his music from Spotify](#) after a group of doctors called out Rogan for his interview of a man who has spread COVID-19 misinformation.

After musician India.Arie revealed last week on Instagram that Rogan had repeatedly used the N-word, he apologized, and Spotify pulled dozens of past episodes from circulation. But Spotify's CEO, Daniel Ek, has said that silencing him is not the answer.

Besides, Ek said in a letter to employees late Sunday, Spotify is not the publisher of "The Joe Rogan Experience."

"But perception due to our exclusive license implies otherwise," Ek said. "So I've been wrestling with how this perception squares with our values."

As it does with music streaming, Spotify dominates podcasting. It has 44% of all podcast user market share—Apple, Amazon and Google are each less than half its size, according to Midia Research.

Podcast platforms have long struggled to moderate the shows broadcast on them. They have not followed the steps of other tech companies like Facebook or Twitter that attempt to detect, fact-check and label misleading or false information.

Meta, which owns Facebook, has enlisted the help of journalists, academics, thousands of contract employees and AI technology to detect misinformation. Even then, misinformation around politics and COVID-19 find big audiences in Facebook groups, on WhatsApp messages and Instagram.

Major podcast companies have largely escaped scrutiny about misinformation. Instead, they have taken down individual podcasts that get bad press for violating stated policies or spreading conspiracy theories. That has resulted in a messy patchwork of shows that have been banned on some tech platforms but are readily available elsewhere.

Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones is banned from Apple, Spotify, YouTube and Facebook—but not Google Podcasts.

Spotify, YouTube and Twitter kicked off Steve Bannon after he suggested Dr. Anthony Fauci should be beheaded. But you can still hear Bannon on Apple Podcasts.

Podcasts are difficult to moderate, said Valerie Wirtschafter, a data

analyst at the Brookings Institute who has researched misinformation on the popular ones. They can run anywhere from 20 minutes to hours, and there are millions of episodes about everything from serial killers to cooking to politics.

"That is an unwieldy world," Wirtschafter said.

Spotify has said that it takes down podcasts that violate its policies against hate speech and break laws. The company publicly revealed its guidelines for the first time following questions raised by Young's action, and said it would add content advisories regarding COVID-19.

When companies start paying content creators, as Spotify does with Rogan and as other platforms do with other high-profile influencers, that can change the game. Facebook last summer announced a \$1 billion fund for creators, wading further into "[media company](#)" territory even as it tries to shed that moniker.

Spotify "had to make a decision that other social media companies are well acquainted with," said Jared Schroeder, a First Amendment scholar and associate professor at Southern Methodist University. "They were drawn into the war. I don't know if there's any going back for them."

Rogan has particular appeal to conservative listeners, but by no means exclusively so. He endorsed Bernie Sanders for president. Like another popular media figure, Fox News' Tucker Carlson, he often portrays himself as someone who is simply asking uncomfortable questions—and he's most upsetting to people who don't listen to him regularly.

Spotify is caught between artists and customers upset enough by Rogan's language to quit the service, and the many fans who would claim him as a victim of "cancel culture" if the company were to make the expensive decision to cut him loose.

"Ultimately, this comes down to the issue of political polarization and how the big tech is caught up in the country's culture wars," said Weiai Xu, a communication professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Spotify risks sending a chilling message to other podcasters that the company won't have their back if it backs away from Rogan, besides putting a severe dent in its business plan.

"If Spotify ends up having to backtrack on Joe Rogan there's a risk it'll be seen as backtracking on podcasts," said Mark Mulligan, managing director of Midia Research.

Spotify's Ek said it could take months to know the impact of the controversy on the [company](#). The market research firm Forrester polled people on Feb. 1 and found that most Spotify users had no intention of cancelling their subscription, but there were many who considered it.

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