

Neil Young and other artists leave Spotify in opposition to COVID-19 misinformation spread by podcaster Joe Rogan

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On Sunday, the audio streaming service Spotify publicly responded to a growing number of artists who have joined rock star Neil Young and removed their music from the platform in response to the spreading of misinformation about the pandemic by the platform's featured podcaster Joe Rogan.

Without ever mentioning Neil Young or Joe Rogan, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek posted a statement on the company news feed that admitted the \$40 billion corporation has had policies for “what is acceptable and what is not” for many years, but “we haven't been transparent around the policies that guide our content more broadly.”

Ek went on to say that Spotify was making public for the first time its platform rules and adding “a content advisory to any podcast episode that includes a discussion about COVID-19.” Ek also said the advisory would direct listeners to its global COVID-19 Hub that includes “data-driven facts, up-to-date information as shared by scientists, physicians, academics and public health authorities around the world, as well as links to trusted sources.”

On Monday, shares of Spotify Technology jumped 13.6 percent in value, a recovery of the more than \$4 billion it had lost after Neil Young published a series of scathing letters on his website beginning on January 24, demanding that his music be removed from the platform.

According to *Rolling Stone*, Young addressed his first letter—which has since been removed from his website—to his manager and a Warner Music Group executive. It stated, in part, “I am doing this because Spotify is spreading fake information about vaccines—potentially causing death to those who believe the disinformation being spread by them. Please act on this immediately today and keep me informed of the time schedule.”

Young then wrote, “I want you to let Spotify know immediately TODAY that I want all my music off their platform. They can have Rogan or Young. Not both.” *Rolling Stone* also quoted Young, writing, “With an

estimated 11 million listeners per episode, JRE, which is hosted exclusively on Spotify, is the world's largest podcast and has tremendous influence. Spotify has a responsibility to mitigate the spread of misinformation on its platform, though the company presently has no misinformation policy.”

Some news outlets wrote that Young's statement saying he was removing his music from the platform was in fact a demand that Spotify censor Joe Rogan. However, Young published two subsequent statements on his website clarifying his position.

On January 26, in a statement entitled “In the Name of Truth,” Young explained his view that Spotify had become “a very damaging force via its public misinformation and lies about COVID.” He wrote that he was very concerned that the largely young listeners on Spotify are “impressionable and easy to swing to the wrong side of the truth” who believe that the platform would never distribute false information. “They unfortunately are wrong. I knew I had to try to point that out,” he added.

Furthermore, Young explained that by removing his music from Spotify, he would lose “60 percent of my worldwide streaming income in the name of Truth” and he denounced Spotify as “the home of life threatening COVID misinformation. Lies being sold for money.”

On January 28, Young issued another statement that said, “When I left Spotify, I felt better.

“I support free speech. I have never been in favor of censorship. Private companies have the right to choose what they profit from, just as I can choose not to have my music support a platform that disseminates harmful information. I am happy and proud to stand in solidarity with the front-line health care workers who risk their lives every day to help others.”

Spotify was founded in 2006 in Sweden by Daniel Ek and Martin Lorentzon. It is the world's largest audio streaming service with 381 million users, 172 million of whom are paid

subscribers. By comparison, Apple Music has 72 million and Amazon Music has 55 million paid subscribers.

Joe Rogan, 54, is a comedian, television host and mixed martial arts commentator who has developed into one of the most popular and lucrative podcast hosts over the past 12 years. In May 2020, he signed an exclusive multi-year deal with Spotify worth a reported \$100 million for the Joe Rogan Experience (JRE).

Rogan has an ongoing relationship with extreme right-wing and fascistic figures such as the radio host and Infowars publisher Alex Jones. Jones was banned directly by Spotify and by a series of other online platforms for his promotion of the alt-right, white supremacy, antisemitism, conspiracy theories and lies about the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in 2012. However, Jones has been given a platform for his fascistic ranting on JRE during extensive conversations with Joe Rogan.

While Rogan maintains that he does not support the views of the far right, his objective is to transmit fascistic and white nationalist views among the public and give them an air of legitimacy. This has certainly been the case with the content of the information on his podcast about the pandemic, much of which would fit perfectly well within the realm of QAnon supporters and the fanatic Trump-supporter and fascist Republican Representative from Georgia, Marjorie Taylor Greene.

For example, on New Year's Eve, episode 1757 of JRE featured an interview by Joe Rogan with Dr. Robert Malone, a right-wing physician who has spread falsehoods that COVID-19 vaccines "don't work" and compared vaccination efforts to the measures carried out by the Nazis in 1930s Germany. Malone also said that efforts to combat the pandemic were "mass formation psychosis," meaning millions of people have been "hypnotized" into believing in COVID testing, vaccination and other measures to stop the spread of the virus.

While Rogan has made comments like, "I don't know if this guy is right or wrong. I'm just asking questions," the lies told by Malone were so outrageous that 270 doctors, physicians and science educators signed an open letter calling on Spotify to take immediate action against pandemic misinformation on its platform. While the open letter from the doctors did not demand that Spotify remove the Rogan-Malone episode, YouTube took the decision to remove it.

In another instance, on April 23, 2021, Rogan discouraged young people from getting the vaccine during a conversation with comedian Dave Smith, saying, "if you're like 21 years old, and you say to me, 'Should I get vaccinated?' I'll go 'no.'"

On Friday, Spotify removed Neil Young's music from its

platform, saying they "regret" his decision, "but hope to welcome him back soon." Neil Young has since been encouraging other artists to join him and asking listeners to move to competing music streaming services such as Amazon and Apple because of their support for Hi-Res audio, which Spotify does not offer.

Over the weekend, Joni Mitchell and Nils Lofgren—a member of Neil Young's band Crazy Horse and Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band—joined the campaign. Mitchell said, "I've decided to remove all of my music from Spotify" in solidarity with Young. Lofgren wrote that he urged "all musicians, artists and music lovers everywhere" to do the same.

In an online video, Rogan responded to the objections and admitted that his show has grown "out of control." He promised to be more balanced and informed about the topics and guests on the program and thanked Spotify for standing behind him. He also claimed he was a huge Neil Young fan.

The opposition of artists with mass international followings to right-wing, anti-science and anti-vaccine views circulating among the public—and especially among the youth—is a welcome development. Contrary to the claims of the far-right, this is not a case of "censorship." Spotify has a massive and lucrative contract with Rogan to promote his podcast.

However, there are much deeper issues involved. The source of the hysterical opposition to the range of actions needed to eliminate COVID-19—including masking, contact tracing, isolation, vaccination, social distancing, economic restrictions and lockdowns—is the capitalist system.

The corporate and financial elite, with the backing of both the Democrats and Republicans, is deliberately cultivating the environment within which far-right individuals and groups are permitted to spread lies and confusion within the public. This is being done in order to force children into the schools, keep workers on the job and guarantee that the profits and wealth of the billionaires continues to roll in regardless of the numbers who will get sick and die from the pandemic.

The only way to stop the lies, defeat the right wing and expose its facilitators like Rogan is through the independent political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system and in the fight for socialism.



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