How do you solve a problem like Joe Rogan?

Cathy Young

Updated February 2, 2022 4:50 PM

The latest COVID-19 controversy surrounds the backlash against hugely popular podcaster and accused junk science promoter Joe Rogan, including moves by prominent artists to pressure the Spotify platform into removing his podcast. To some people, mostly progressives, this is a laudable effort to curb health misinformation that could literally kill; to others, mostly conservatives, it's yet another attempt by left-wing nannies to curb dissenting speech.

Rogan, once a stand-up comedian, has amassed a huge internet following — an estimated 11 million listeners per podcast episode. A politically eclectic, libertarian-leaning maverick, Rogan tends toward anti-establishment views and skepticism of the "mainstream media" — a stance currently linked to skepticism toward mainstream narratives on COVID-19.

Obviously, there's value in questioning mainstream narratives. But in science and medicine, the "establishment" is nearly always right, at least after initial stumbles in dealing with a new problem like COVID. While Rogan has not embraced wilder conspiracy theories, he has repeatedly, along with some guests, questioned the vaccines' efficacy and safety — and promoted unproven treatments such as the antiparasitic drug ivermectin. While Rogan is often willing to admit being wrong and has had mainstream guests on the subject, his show generally skews toward vaccine skepticism and quack remedy validation.

Last month, Spotify was criticized for platforming Rogan in an open letter from 270 health care workers, scientists, and other experts. Then, singer Neil Young said he wanted his music off Spotify unless it dropped Rogan. Since Rogan is the bigger draw, Spotify dropped Young — but other artists joined in. Spotify has now decided to add disclaimers to Rogan's COVID episodes, while Rogan promises to try harder to air more mainstream voices.

The attempt to get Rogan booted from Spotify is not a First Amendment issue: There is no coercion by government, only market-based pressure, and freedom of association — the right to choose to exit a platform that violates one's values — is on the boycotters' side.

But "legal" is not the same as "right." An organized effort to shut down speech because of the arguments it presents should always be troubling — particularly when that speech does not cross the line into clearly unacceptable behavior such as calls for violence, or racial or sexual slurs. If such an effort can be used to deplatform Rogan for what is widely seen as medical misinformation, can it also be used to deplatform those who question whether, as mainstream narratives claim, racism is a principal factor in police brutality? Or, if the right gets more cultural influence, to shut down anti-racist conversations deemed anti-American?

The pandemic has created a unique situation in which one can argue that "bad" speech causes immediate risk of harm: persuading at least some people to forgo vaccination, or lending confirmation to their biases. This is different from, say, arguing that transgender women should not be able to play women's sports. Yet we have seen many attempts to curb speech based on vastly stretchable definitions of "harm."

What's more, in a free society, shutting down someone with a Rogan-sized following is not an option. Expel him from mainstream venues, and many fans will follow him to fringe ones where some will be radicalized. Far better to keep him inside the tent and encourage him to moderate his views and engage the mainstream.

Spotify's solution does exactly that. But the bigger question of how to handle medical misinformation in a pandemic remains unsolved — and perhaps cannot be solved as long as free expression is one of our fundamental values.