



Podcasting

Sinister sounds: podcasts are becoming the new medium of misinformation

Ariel Bogle

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In the drawn-out aftermath of the US election, Amelia's* dad was losing faith in Fox News. Why wasn't it covering more allegations of voter fraud, he asked. The network was "a joke".

And so he turned to alternative sources of information: podcasts like Bannon's War Room, hosted by alt-right figure Steve Bannon, which regularly broadcasts baseless claims about ballot dumps and illegal voters. And an old favourite of his, the rightwing Catholic podcast The Taylor Marshall Show.

In the US, Australia and across the Anglosphere, people regularly spend hours with strangers talking directly into their ears. Around one third of Australian news consumers are reported to be podcast listeners, and indications are that numbers have grown during the pandemic.

Yet the role of podcasts in the information ecosystem has gone largely unexamined. While alt-right figures have been increasingly chased off Facebook and Twitter, podcasting is shaping up as the next arena where the fight over questionable or

dangerous content will play out. However, the problem of how to moderate audio content is proving thorny.

Take Bannon's War Room. [A November episode](#) of the show was removed from YouTube due to Bannon's violent comments about the leader of the United States' pandemic response, Dr Anthony Fauci, and the FBI director, Christopher Wray: "I'd put the heads on pikes, right," Bannon said. "I'd put them at the two corners of the White House as a warning to federal bureaucrats."

But the episode remains accessible on Google Podcasts, which is owned by the same company. And while [Bannon was booted off Twitter](#) for the comments and the show appears to have been removed from Spotify, you can still find it on Apple Podcasts and Pocket Casts.

The more Amelia's dad plugged into Bannon's podcast, the more reluctant he was to wear a mask outside - although Amelia, a student from the US state of Georgia, could sometimes still pressure him to wear one.

"Listening to Steve Bannon and spending more time on Facebook because he's had more time at home due to the pandemic, all of that has shifted him to the right," she says. "It's more extreme than I expected - than I've ever seen him before."

Part of the 'disinformation pipeline'

Apps such as Apple and Google Podcasts "are significant gatekeepers" of what kind of audio content reaches our ears, says Evelyn Douek, a lecturer at Harvard Law School, although they function more as directories for organising and discovering shows than as social networking platforms, and have varying degrees of oversight and control.

A Google spokesperson said Google Podcasts indexes audio available on the web much like Google Search. "This can include topics and ideas that may be controversial," she said. "Google Podcasts ... only removes podcasts from its index in very rare circumstances, largely guided by local law."

Podcasts can serve as "an entry point and a point of legitimation" for unfounded claims, says Dr Sarah Roberts, an associate professor at the University of California, Los Angeles and a moderation expert.

"The net effect is not only to put fake, bogus and debunked claims into the larger public conversation, but to shift the needle entirely on the public's attention and areas of concern," she says.

As podcasting grows in stature and revenue, its disinformation problem can't be ignored. "Too many [podcast platforms] have not done the work around content

moderation of their bread-and-butter material,” Roberts says. “This will undoubtedly serve as a new area of liability.”

Most podcast platforms already have content policies. Apple Podcasts [prohibits the promotion of violence](#). Spotify [bans content that incites](#) hatred based on race or gender identity, among other things. But the adequacy of these policies, not to mention if, or how, they are enforced, remains opaque - especially if the problematic content is espoused by a program guest rather than the host.

It can also be difficult to measure the reach and impact of podcasts that traffic in political or health conspiracies, compared with a Facebook post or a tweet. The tools of swift amplification - the like, comment or retweet - aren't quite there.

And programs don't remain in just one place. Like Bannon's War Room, many podcasts also exist as YouTube videos - in Australia, YouTube is reportedly [the most popular podcast](#) platform - or are hosted on external websites. All of which helps make them another part of the disinformation pipeline.

Having fringe views presented on a major podcast app provides an illusion of authority. But while many of the major podcast platforms do commission programs, much of their content is essentially created by any third party with a mic - and potentially goes unscrutinised.

Spotify removed four podcasts that promoted the QAnon conspiracy in October [after a report from Media Matters](#), but it's still possible to find shows that deliver QAnon content to listeners on the app, as well as on Apple and Google Podcasts.

Providing 'a pedestal' for questionable views

If there is a centre to the fight over podcast moderation, it is The Joe Rogan Experience. Spotify signed the popular podcast, hosted by a former UFC commentator and comedian, [in an exclusive deal this year](#).

Before he joined Spotify, Rogan interviewed far-right figures such as Stefan Molyneux and Milo Yiannopoulos - who have been banned from YouTube and Facebook respectively for hate speech - and arguably gave others a big break.

Kish*, a medical worker in Australia, started listening to the show when Rogan still broadcast from what seemed to be his home office. It was intimate, a bit transgressive. “I felt like the third wheel being able to listen to his conversations he would have with his friends,” he said.

But he became more critical of how Rogan treated health issues, especially when he thought the show was giving guests “a pedestal to sell their snake oil”.

“The whole Covid issue really pushed it over the edge,” he says.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Kish appreciated it when Rogan **hosted a respected epidemiologist** who spoke about “simple ways of how to stay safe and outlined how this virus could be devastating to the world”.

But it wasn't long before the narrative changed. “I feel like it all went out the window when Rogan started speaking out against mask wearers ... [and] against the government for the lockdowns to control and mitigate the spread of the virus.”

During the pandemic, one of Rogan's guests suggested the virus may have been “enhanced” and escaped from a lab, and another, the Tesla CEO, Elon Musk, claimed without evidence that hospitals were reporting patients as having Covid-19 for financial gain.

In September, Rogan **apologised on Instagram for parroting the conspiracy theory** that antifa activists were responsible for the wildfires on the US west coast. Perhaps most notoriously, Rogan hosted conspiracy theorist Alex Jones for a sprawling three hours in October.

Jones, whose own show **had been kicked off Spotify in 2018** under its hate speech policy (it was also removed from Facebook, Apple and YouTube), was given space to broadcast a stream of consciousness about everything from climate change to vaccines, with minimal fact checking.

In the aftermath, **as reported by BuzzFeed**, Spotify said it would not ban “specific individuals” from being guests on other people's shows. The platform, primarily known for music streaming, clearly didn't want to set an interventionist precedent as it made a play for podcasting.

So what should be done?

Despite his criticism of Rogan, Kish doesn't think Rogan's show should be moderated or removed, though he says it should be scrutinised. He likes the way Twitter labels tweets by public figures as misinformation, but is unsure where we should draw the line.

“If he still somehow found his content to be moderated, I think the free publicity it would bring to his podcast and notoriety can only contribute to more listeners,” Kish says of Rogan.

In Amelia's view, removing shows that traffic in disinformation might work, at least for her dad. “If it wasn't available on YouTube or the Apple Podcast store, or if people weren't posting these videos on Facebook in snippets, then I don't think he would have found it,” she said. “I don't think he would have gone to the length of seeking it out.”

But better and more moderation is only a partial answer to a more difficult question. The appeal of Bannon's podcast to Amelia's father arises not only out of his politics, she says, but a loss of trust in public officials and media, and above all, the isolation.

The informality and intimacy of his preferred shows are both their appeal and danger - the way they talk right to you, tell you what you want to hear.

"For my dad, I think podcasts have tried to fill that void of human interaction," she said.

* Surnames have been withheld to protect privacy

Ariel Bogle is a journalist and analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute who researches online disinformation.

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