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Subject: After 3 hours of Joe Rogan, I have thoughts
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WL



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Hi, everyone. After first angrily challenging a media report about his retirement, GOAT Tom Brady said ... he is retiring. Guess he didn't want his announcement deflated.



The Plain View

Early this week, the public got statements from two middle-aged men with shaved heads. One is Daniel Ek, a Swedish billionaire who heads Spotify, the audio streaming company. The other is Joe Rogan, a comedian and wrestling commentator turned podcaster, whose show lives exclusively on Spotify. In an episode that went live on December 31, Rogan's guest spun conspiracy theories about Covid vaccines, thematically consistent with some previous shows. This spurred the singer Neil Young to pull his catalog from the streamer, and some other artists followed suit.

Medical experts also objected to the podcast. The ensuing conflagration engulfed Spotify, tanking its stock and causing some subscribers to bail. Apple Music seized the moment, calling its service the home of Neil Young. And the gab-osphere exploded with takes on the controversy. This forced responses from the shiny-domed men at the center of it.

Ek's written response was a corporate-speak promise to do better, and a belated reveal of Spotify's content standards. He perversely avoided addressing the actual controversy: Neil Young wasn't ticked off about whether or not Spotify slipped in a disclaimer before a podcast containing misinformation, he was steamed about *Joe Rogan*. Ek didn't even mention the guy. Fail.

Rogan, a master communicator, did much better. Addressing his phone camera, he explained how he simply hosted well-credentialed guests whose views may be outside of mainstream wisdom. He just wants to hear what they have to say! "I'm interested in finding out what the facts are," he said. "I don't always get it right." He agreed that it might be a good idea to follow conversations with Covid skeptics with interviews of more conventional experts. He's cool with the concept of a warning instructing people to talk with their doctors before episodes involving controversial Covid conversations. And he's still a Neil Young fan, even if the love is now one-way. Rogan ended by explaining that he's misunderstood. "I never tried to do anything with this podcast other than just talk to people and have interesting conversations," he said.

Despite those statements, the Spotify controversy rages on, its soundtrack now bolstered by the defection of Crosby, Stills, and Nash, a trio famous for not finding common ground. A complicated set of issues are involved, including platform politics, free speech, and internet economics. Instead of

bloviating on those, I thought I'd go to the source—the actual podcast in question. This involved a Herculean act of audio stamina, listening to all of Joe Rogan's three-hour interview with mRNA vaccine apostate Robert Malone, episode 1757, slotted between a podcast with an author addressing Big Pharma and one featuring Carrot Top.

It's not the first time I took in *The Joe Rogan Experience*—I previously listened to the Elon Musk interviews and a few others. I enjoy Rogan's easy conversational flow and his skill at engaging guests in candid dialog, but sometimes blanch at asides disparaging the threat of Covid. The Robert Malone episode was something else. As Rogan says in his video, Malone had a hand in developing the mRNA technique. But he has since become a virulent critic of widespread vaccine adoption, charging that a massive coverup has suppressed talk of its harmful side effects. Many of his specific claims have been debunked, leading experts to conclude that he is a source of misinformation.

On December 30, when the duo taped the podcast, Malone had just been tossed off Twitter for vaccine disinformation. He's a medical scientist, and some of his points make sense on their face. But others are at odds with well-documented studies. In the podcast, Rogan gives Malone large blocks of uninterrupted time to make an alarming case that vaccines can be dangerous and often unnecessary, and that the suppression of his message is a threat to the liberty of all.

Malone's claims are woven into a larger narrative that sinister forces are at work in some sort of global conspiracy. It involves the drug companies, news organizations in league with them, Joe Biden, and of course Anthony Fauci. "Our government is out of control on this and they are lawless," he says, without rebuttal from Rogan. "They completely disregard bioethics. They

from Rogan. They completely disregard protocols. They completely disregard the federal common rule. They have broken all the rules that I know of, that I've been trained on for years and years and years. These mandates of an experimental vaccine are explicitly illegal ... They are flat out illegal and they don't care. Hopefully, we're going to be able to stop them before they take our kids."

The entirety of the podcast makes it clear that Rogan and Malone are on the same team. When Malone uncorks questionable allegations about disastrous vaccine effects and the global cabal of politicians and drugmakers pulling strings, Rogan responds with *uh-huhs* and *wows*. Rogan's mode of pushback is pitching softballs: He will ask something like, "How is that possible?" which invites Malone to go deeper into his rabbit hole (a term he uses approvingly 12 times in the discussion). That evokes more *wows* from Rogan. Often Malone backs up his contentions with unnamed studies or, at one point, Substack posts. Charges like Joe Biden taking a fake vaccine go unchallenged. At times, Rogan brings up vaccine-skeptic talking points unprompted, displaying a firm grasp of the arguments against taking or mandating the jab.

But here's the tell: Not once does the well-read Rogan mention two charts that are extremely familiar to anyone with the most casual consumption of news. You certainly have seen them. One displays the raw numbers of people hospitalized by Covid; the other enumerates people who die from the virus. In both charts there is a line representing people who are vaccinated—it hovers over the baseline of zero, like icing on a cake. The other line is the unvaccinated, and it is a formidable mountain. Depending on the geographical area or time frame, the numbers report that unvaccinated people are many, many times more likely to be hospitalized or die. That's not a rumor or an anecdote or

something found on an unvetted paper or a Substack declaration. It's the truth, and you can check the coffins to confirm.

Anyone discouraging vaccine use must deal with those charts. But you can listen to the entire 186-minute lovefest between Rogan and Malone and have no idea that our hospitals are overloaded with Covid cases, and that on the day their conversation transpired, 7,559 people worldwide died of Covid, 1,410 of which were in the United States. The vast majority of them were unvaccinated. (Malone claims that hospitals fraudulently report Covid as cause of death all the time, even when people die of gunshots, in order to collect more government funds. That claim has been debunked.) Instead they spoke at length about how *the vaccine* might kill you or your children.

That's why crusty Neil Young made his stand, triggering a crisis for Spotify and Joe Rogan.

Some things seem pretty clear from this mess. Personally, I want a free society where Joe Rogan can have whoever he wants on his podcast, and can conduct an interview any way he wants. But that means accepting that responsible publishing outlets might not want to be associated with him, or pay him nine-figure sums. (At the moment, the Spotify money firehose is still in full force.) Robert Malone should also be free to present his case—as he has managed to do, to millions of people through conduits like Rogan, Tucker Carlson, and his Substack—but also must accept that if he violates the misinformation policies of platforms like Twitter, he might be bounced.

Daniel Ek should know that as a presenter of original content, he bears responsibility for that content. He cannot squirm away by saying that he is only licensing Rogan's work, not publishing it

(as he apparently told his employees). Ek paid \$100 million so that Spotify would be the exclusive home of *The Joe Rogan Experience*—Spotify’s podcast flagship—and no amount of contractual doublespeak erases that. Ek chose to overlook Rogan’s well-known issues because of his popularity. The blowback is not surprising. If Ek wanted to avoid that, he should have set up two companies: one with proprietary podcasts, and another that shovels money to his music-label partners (a fraction of that going to artists) by hosting the celestial jukebox.

Here’s what’s *not* clear: How we got to the point where the one of most popular podcasts in America, hosted by one of the smartest communicators on the planet, takes its listeners down a path to vaccine refusal without mentioning the topic’s most vital piece of information. It’s a mystery that, sadly, defines our time.



Time Travel

In 2009, I almost interviewed Neil Young, but he changed his mind, something I learned while waiting for an Uber to take me to his ranch. (At least I wasn’t nearing the end of a years-long biography project with him.) So I wound up writing about *Archives*, his giant box Blu-Ray set, without first-hand discussion from the man, though I did speak to his media wizard, Larry Johnson.

Archives shares its central interface metaphor with 1970s computers: a file cabinet. That navigational trope has more miles on it than Old Black, Young's vintage Les Paul guitar. Young plans to add folders to the cabinet by letting users download additional material. Subsequent volumes of Archives

will stretch the cabinet to ludicrous proportions. "It will be like a file drawer that goes on for a mile and a half," Johnson says. But this puts limits on the Neil Wide Web that don't exist in Google's world; search functionality would be a welcome addition.

Considering the rate of production at Young's digital operation, it may take a decade or two until Archives gets around to the current period of Young's oeuvre. My guess is that by then the project will quite logically move to the cloud (with access granted via subscription fee or limited-time pass), where all of Young's outtakes and memorabilia—along with photos, sound files, and reminiscences provided by his fans—will be available in an instant. (If the Internet of 2020 can't deliver top-grade audio quality and hi-def images smoothly, all will be lost anyway.) The alternative—a stack of 40 or 50 Blu-ray disks on the verge of irrelevance—would just leave us helpless.



Ask Me One Thing

Jerry asks, “Given the current trends of rising inflation and massive borrowing by the government and economic domination by authoritarian China, what indicators are there to show the economy is not on the verge of collapse?”

Thanks for that disturbing question, Jerry. I should note that you tied this with an opinion about the 25-year bet between Kirkpatrick Sale and Kevin Kelly that I wrote about a year ago—you seem to side with Sale that civilization is headed toward the dump, though not by 2020 as he predicted. I agree with your implicit contentions that rising inflation, massive debt, and

China's rise are all worrisome. (Though some economists aren't too bothered by the borrowing.) But when you say "verge of collapse," things get trickier. If you're defining collapse as a Depression-level crash, or even something like the Great Recession of 2008, I guess there are indicators you can point to, like the stock market bubble and of course the inflation. But if you are truly fixed on Sales' version of collapse—concerned we're on the countdown clock to Mad Max—I do think there's at least one reason for optimism: Even in our deadlocked political structure, we took action during the pandemic to keep things going. Still, if you want to do the prepper thing just in case, feel free. Your purchases of generators, flashlights, and rice in bulk will help the economy!

*You can submit questions to mail@wired.com. Write **ASK LEVY** in the subject line.*



End Times Chronicle

Facebook (the app) is actually losing users.



Last but Not Least

The heartbreaking story of a phone scam, enabled by financial apps.

A scrappy underdog takes on the AI elite in an underground Darpa Robotics Challenge.

Pissed off from an attack, a lone hacker takes down North Korea's internet.

No, the four-day workweek isn't perfect. But it beats the alternative. Note to my editors: See you Tuesday!



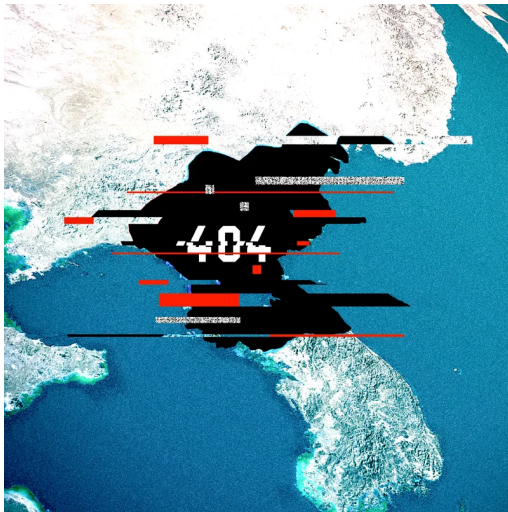
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They Were 'Calling to Help.' Then They Stole Thousands

BY BECCA ANDREWS

When my mom fell victim to a phone scam, we learned a painful truth: The explosion of personal finance apps makes it all too easy to target vulnerable people.



North Korea Hacked Him. So He Took Down Its Internet

BY ANDY GREENBERG

Disappointed with the lack of US response to the Hermit Kingdom's attacks against US security

Here Come the Underdogs of the Robot Olympics

BY TOM VANDERBILT

Can a scrappy team of robotics undergrads play to win against the best-funded labs in the world? At the Darpa Challenge, it's anyone's game.



The 4-Day Week Is Flawed. Workers Still Want It

BY CAITLIN HARRINGTON

Workers say the shortened workweek is a success, but the reality is more complicated

against cybersecurity
researchers, one hacker took
matters into his own hands.

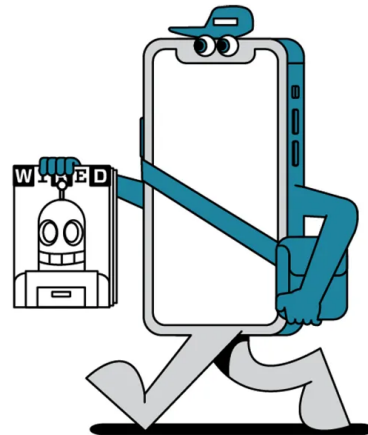
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