

Patreon Bars Anti-Feminist for Racist Speech, Inciting Revolt

By Nellie Bowles

Dec. 24, 2018

Sam Harris, the polemical atheist neuroscientist known for his popular podcast “Waking Up,” was making tens of thousands of dollars a month from fans who donated to him through Patreon, a crowdfunding site.

That stopped this month. On Dec. 6, Patreon kicked the anti-feminist polemic Carl Benjamin, who works under the name Sargon of Akkad, off its site for using racist language on YouTube. That same week, it removed the right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos a day after he opened an account.

The moves prompted a revolt. Mr. Harris, citing worries about censorship, announced that he would leave Patreon. He was joined in protest by about half a dozen other prominent members of the site, including the conservative-leaning psychologist Jordan Peterson and the libertarian podcaster Dave Rubin, who also earn money from Patreon.

“These recent expulsions seem more readily explained by political bias,” Mr. Harris wrote to his followers.

The furor is a microcosm of the conflicts that are playing out across the internet as technology platforms try to limit the spread of hateful speech.

This year, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have all drawn increasingly stark lines around what constitutes hate speech and are figuring out how to enforce those rules. In August, for example, Apple, Google and Facebook banned the right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones for violating hate speech rules, setting off a cascading effect.

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But as tech platforms try to get a handle on the issue, they are stoking the ire of their content creators, many of whom brand themselves as free speech warriors. Some accuse the companies of censorship. Others say the tech sites are biased and that hate speech is an ambiguous term. Now the digital dissent is becoming increasingly widespread, upending even smaller websites.



Patreon, founded in 2013 by Jack Conte, a musician and disc jockey, is valued at \$450 million and employs about 170 people in San Francisco. Jim McAuley for The New York Times

“The concept of hate speech is irreducibly subjective and vague,” said Nadine Strossen, author of “Hate: Why We Should Resist It With Free Speech, Not Censorship.”

Patreon, founded in 2013 by Jack Conte, a musician and disc jockey, is valued at \$450 million and employs about 170 people in San Francisco. Fans donate to the content creators on the site whom they enjoy, and Patreon takes a 5 percent cut of the income.

While the site is relatively small, with a little over 100,000 creators and two million people donating monthly to those creators, it has become the de facto paycheck for a cohort of prominent self-styled internet philosophers who eschew or have been ousted from traditional bastions like universities or magazines.

Among Patreon’s hodgepodge of creators is the left-leaning podcast group Chapo Trap House, which makes more than \$110,000 a month from the site, according to Graphtreon, which tracks Patreon activity. Mr. Peterson, a best-selling author, earns around \$66,000 a month from the site. Sex-related content creators are also getting monthly subscribers on Patreon, and a Pokemon Go community is the top earner, making up to \$500,000 a month, according to Graphetreon.

Patreon takes a highly personal approach to policing speech. While Google and Facebook use algorithms as a first line of defense for questionable content, Patreon has human moderators. They give warnings and reach out to talk to offenders, presenting options for “education” and “reform.” Some activists hope this will become a model for a better and kinder internet.

“There are no automated takedowns,” Mr. Conte said. “As a creator myself dealing with these big tech platforms and getting an automated takedown notice, there’s no appeals process. You can’t talk to a human. And I never want to do that.”

Jaqueline Hart, Patreon’s head of trust and safety, said her team watches for and will investigate complaints about any content posted on Patreon and on other sites like YouTube and Facebook that violates what it defines as hate speech. That includes “serious attacks, or even negative generalizations, of people based on their race [and] sexual orientation,” she has said.

If someone has breached Patreon's policy, the company contacts the offender with a specific plan, which usually involves asking for the content to be removed and for a public apology.

The conversations with creators can quickly become complicated, nuanced, and, well, human, she said. Among other challenges, Patreon has to decide what qualifies as a sincere and thorough apology. Still, having human moderators has changed its users' behaviors more than simply deleting accounts would, Ms. Hart said.

"We hand-hold creators, and we work with them one on one, and nearly every creator reforms — and so it's quite a successful process," she said.

The work takes up a large amount of resources. Ms. Hart said around 10 percent of Patreon employees are dedicated to her team.

This month, the site's moderators received a complaint about Mr. Benjamin, who had risen to fame railing against diversity and feminism during the GamerGate movement in 2014. Mr. Benjamin used the N-word and anti-gay language during an interview posted to YouTube on Feb. 7, Patreon found.

On Dec. 6, the company told Mr. Benjamin that it would freeze his account and that he could appeal. Mr. Benjamin objected and said the video in question should not fall under Patreon's rules because it was on YouTube.

For Mr. Benjamin, the timing was surprising. "My brand has been politically incorrect for years," he said in a video he later posted to his YouTube channel called "The Patreon Witch Trials."

Mr. Benjamin, who did not respond to requests for comment, has 870,000 subscribers on YouTube and had more than 3,000 subscribers on Patreon, from which he had been making around \$12,000 a month. Many of his videos show just a static cartoon or a series of images, with his voice speaking against movements for gender equality.

More recently, Mr. Benjamin has moved from the fringe toward the heart of the new right. In October, he posted an hourlong interview with Steve Bannon, President Trump's former chief strategist.

Mr. Benjamin did not respond to attempts to engage him in the reform process, Ms. Hart said.

"His response to us when we told him about the reform process was to nitpick and say, 'I was being anti-Nazi,'" Ms. Hart said. "You cannot say those words on our platform. It doesn't matter who you're directing them at."

His removal from Patreon immediately stirred up others on the site.

"I think the most likely outcome, if this continues, is that all contentious speech or behavior will put the speaker or actor at risk of serious financial and social sanctions, and strip them of all defense," Mr. Peterson wrote in an email.

Mr. Rubin, the libertarian podcaster, tweeted, "The Platform War has begun."

Mr. Rubin and Mr. Peterson said they plan to start their own version of Patreon, which will be less censorious. Mr. Peterson said his Patreon subscriptions had dropped to around 7,500, from about 10,000 over the summer, according to Graphtron.

It's unclear how effective Mr. Peterson's and Mr. Rubin's efforts will be. Alternatives to mainstream sites, such as the white supremacy-oriented Hatreon, have largely been failures.

And while many internet creators argue that Silicon Valley is trying to censor free speech, what the companies are doing is legal, said Vera Eidelman, staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union's speech, privacy and technology project. "The First Amendment right is on the side of the company," she said.

Those quitting Patreon in solidarity with Mr. Benjamin may have other motives behind their sudden outrage, Mr. Conte said. As content creators using the site grow more famous and their income more significant, the 5 percent cut that Patreon takes of their donations may have begun to seem cumbersome, he said. Other large creators are joining the rebellion.

"You can use a press debacle like this to drum up your community and rile people up and get them to support a cause," Mr. Conte said. "We welcome competition."

In his exit note from Patreon, Mr. Harris, who gathered his fan base as a pugnacious atheist and fierce critic of Islam, wrote that he wanted his business interests to be freed from the site. He singled out Ms. Hart's team.

"I consider it no longer tenable to expose any part of my podcast funding to the whims of Patreon's 'Trust and Safety' committee," Mr. Harris wrote. He added a link to his own website, where fans can enter their credit card information and choose a monthly contribution.