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Partisan podcasters: “Roast” universalism and comedy as platform currency

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Abstract

This paper examines the convergence of platform-dependent comedy and political commentary through the lens of the “Rogansphere” and the 2024 re-election of Donald Trump. Situating the study within the framework of platformisation, I argue that podcasting comedians have transitioned from mere entertainers to “embedded skeptics” who navigate platformed personality capitalism (Rosamond, 2022). By leveraging an ethos of “roast universalism” — a belief in equal-opportunity offense, paired with strategic sensitivity to platform policies — these actors facilitate both the politicization of comedy and the “comedification” of political discourse.

Analysis focuses on two contrasting phenomena: the “Roganisation” of the Austin comedy scene via Tony Hinchcliffe’s podcast Kill Tony, and the emergence of the “Rogan-Hatersphere,” a critical network of YouTube content creators. I argue that, while figures like Rogan and Hinchcliffe utilize “cancel discourses” (Ng, 2022) to frame their alliance with tech billionaires and Trump-adjacent ideologies as a defense of free speech, the Hatersphere acts as a subsequent counter-force. These “personality enforcers” hold comedians accountable, challenging the cynical use of comedy as a depoliticized platform commodity. Ultimately, this research highlights how the unique creative sub-class of podcasting comedians negotiates the boundaries between U.S.-exceptionalist digital values and partisan political influence.

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Introduction

This paper discusses the role of podcasting comedians in the context of the 2024 re-election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. I situate this cultural-political convergence within the context of platformisation (Poell, *et al.*, 2019) — that is, the platformisation of two cultural fields: the comedy industry, as an increasingly platform-dependent ecosystem, and political commentary as a remit of mainstream news media, which are rapidly losing cultural relevance to the looser, platform-native format of

podcasting. The main goal of the paper is to highlight the unique investment of podcasting comedians in "platforming" as an existential imperative, and the subsequent "cancel discourses" (Ng, 2022) through which they frame platform policies as crucial cultural factors in the convergence with Trump-adjacent talking points. This convergence is important as it channels two concurrent processes, also documented in recent literature on podcasting, political humour, and platformisation (Colbjørnsen, 2024; Isaacs, 2025; Becker, 2025): the politicisation of "roast" comedy and the "comedification" of political commentary. Building on research on "roast universalism" as a communicative ethos in which podcasting comedians are specifically invested (Bozzi, 2025), I propose that the construction of a controversial persona for comedians becomes a form of discursive platform edgework, enacted concurrently from opposing perspectives as both an individual self-branding practice and a collective "personality enforcement" reaction from critical fandoms.

Podcasting comedians are an under-studied creative sub-class, with specific values that set them apart from more widely discussed online ecosystems for political or cultural influence, such as the alt-right or manosphere. Significantly, I differentiate them from more politically-driven "ideological entrepreneurs" (Finlayson, 2023) by examining the so-called "Rogansphere", a constellation of U.S.-based stand-up comics revolving around the influential Joe Rogan Experience podcast. I do so by discussing two related phenomena: the success of Tony Hinchcliffe and his live podcast Kill Tony, and the rise of what I call the "Rogan-Hatersphere", a network of content creators that routinely post critical content about Rogan and his entourage.

This analysis expands my previous work on podcasting comedians as agents of platformisation, centred on JRE as an "adaptive cultural platform" that enables Rogan himself to leverage his large cross-platform following to negotiate advantageous content policies, frame infrastructural discourse by engaging with platform owners individually, and provide/enhance visibility for his entourage of podcasting comedians (Bozzi, 2025). Significantly, Rogan's "becoming platform" is exemplary of what Rosamond (2022) called "platformed personality capitalism", a contingency where a "YouTube personality" becomes a quality of the platform itself, an "ambiguous assemblage of persons, performances, platforms and their techno-cultural artifacts" [1]. This framing remains important for this paper as it allows it to zoom out from Rogan himself — as the centre of a semi-coordinated ecosystem of podcasting comedians, invested in platforming as necessary to their artistic credibility and business model — to investigate Kill Tony and the Rogan-Hatersphere as contrasting off-shoots of Rogan's YouTube personality. In the first case, Kill Tony contributes to the "Roganisation" of the Austin comedy scene and U.S. comedy overall by serially promoting a particular brand of JRE-ready comedian, with specific attitudes towards platforms; in the second case, the Rogan-Hatersphere piggy-backs on the Rogansphere to construct an ecology of JRE-critical content, where Rogan's YouTube personality indeed works as a "performance genre, medium, and platform infrastructure" (Rosamond, 2023). Together, both phenomena help understand how platform boundaries are negotiated or affirmed discursively alongside personality-driven platform cultures.

With this premise, the next sections develop as follows. The first contextualises how, over the last two decades, U.S. comedy has been recruited as an actor in the culture wars, leading to the establishment of the Joe Rogan Experience podcast as an arena for the discussion of comedians' interests in the age of social media, as well as a catalyst for the comedy industry. The main goal of this section is to highlight how, within a particular U.S.-led Western cultural imaginary, the figure of the comedian has become the cultural avatar of the perceived opposition between "freedom of speech" and "cancel culture". This coupling conceals very situated interests under the banner of a universalist value — namely, the idea of social media as a U.S.-exceptionalist asset for economic growth and personal expression.

The second section focuses on roast comic and Rogan protégé Tony Hinchcliffe and his live podcast Kill Tony. I argue Hinchcliffe's podcast represents the most successful and authentic poster child of the Rogansphere's "roast universalist" comedic ethos (Bozzi, 2025) — a belief in equal-opportunity offense, paired with sensitivity to platform content policies — as well as the foremost symptom of the "Roganisation" of the Austin comedy scene. "Roganisation" is here meant to describe a process that began with the exodus of JRE-adjacent comedians from Los Angeles to Austin, starting during the pandemic and

culminating with the subsequent establishment of Rogan's own club, the Comedy Mothership. Reflecting the political connotation of this process and how it has been framed by commentators, the section outlines Hinchcliffe's own politicisation as a Trump-supporting "roast comedian". The politicisation of this brand of comedy peaked after a pre-election rally, where the comedian made a now infamous joke about Puerto Rico, which propelled him to new levels of fame (and scrutiny). By examining Hinchcliffe's follow-up, half-hour comedy release "Garbage", hosted on Elon Musk's X platform, I demonstrate how the spectre of cancel culture is used to benefit the interests of comedians like Hinchcliffe, as well as platform owners.

The third section articulates how the Rogansphere, the Roganisation of the Austin comedy scene, and the politicisation of roast comedy have also engendered a collateral phenomenon, which I playfully call the Rogan-Hatersphere. This network of creators is especially useful to reveal the evolving trajectories of the several members of Rogan's podcasting entourage, in relation to both Rogan himself and their own podcast audiences. The section briefly summarises some of the main themes that emerge from this content ecosystem, mainly based on YouTube: the Rogansphere comedians' detachment from their audience, lazy comedy production, contradictory attitude towards free speech and cancel culture, and alignment with the Trump administration and the tech Right. Rogan-Hatersphere creators often appear to speak from a disillusioned fan perspective, so their importance lies in a cumulative awareness of the poetic ethos of their targets (the fact they are comedians, with a repertoire of speech and values), retained memory of their professional integrity (or lack thereof), and care to enforce a form of accountability towards their audiences. The section ends with the analysis of a video trilogy by Hatersphere-favourite Elephant Graveyard, who was most notably able to breach into the discourse of Rogansphere comedians themselves.

I conclude the paper by emphasising how podcasting comedians represent a crucial community among content creators, navigating "platformed personality capitalism" (Rosamond, 2022) as "embedded skeptics" (Bozzi, 2025) who frame their ideological affinities using contextual and even artistic criteria. On a hypothetical axis between the "politicisation of comedy" and "comedification of political commentary", comedians like Rogan and Hinchcliffe are constantly shifting between the passive role of *edgework platformers* and the more active one of partisan roast universalists. Both frame their work as coming from an outsider fringe that breaks with mainstream media logics, however they also flaunt their embedded status (*e.g.*, proximity to Trump and Musk) as a de-politicised platform commodity. While crucial to maintain a cultural edge, in this process of (political) neutralisation comedy acts as a fundamental conduit and a universalist platform value. If belief in free speech makes podcasting comedians akin to cultural promoters of values similar to those championed by (for example) free software activists, their alliance with tech billionaires like Elon Musk also reveals the more cynical side of what winds up being an intrinsically U.S.-exceptionalist, necessarily platform-capitalist creative class. In this techno-cultural environment, then, the importance of the Rogan-Hatersphere as a network of *platformed personality enforcers* represents an analogous yet contrarian cultural force, with the potential to curb the ideological shapeshifting of the roast universalists by anchoring it to some kind of audience accountability.

Enlisting comedy in culture wars

> "I absolutely love that Colbert got fired. His talent was even less than his ratings. I hear Jimmy Kimmel is next. Has even less talent than Colbert! Greg Gutfeld is better than all of them combined, including the Moron on NBC who ruined the once great Tonight Show." — Donald Trump on Truth Social, 18 July 2025

This post by Donald Trump on his own social network Truth Social (Hibberd, 2025) says it all. Over the summer of 2025, two prominent liberal late show hosts saw that their shows were cancelled: Stephen

Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel. While Kimmel's show was eventually reinstated, Colbert's run ends the show's long history, begun under David Letterman in 1993. While network CBS attributed the decision to declining ad sales and the show losing tens of millions of dollars every year, many speculated the host's open liberal views and criticism of the U.S. president (and his settlement with the network's parent company Paramount, then waiting for government approval over a merger) were the real culprits (Baragona, 2025). As for the lesser-known Greg Gutfeld, he is the Fox News equivalent of Colbert, and one of many comedians profiled by Sienkiewicz and Marx (2022) in their analysis of the "right-wing comedy complex", a media infrastructure with its own channels, programmes, celebrities, and audiences, engendering a thriving conservative comedy ecosystem that remains largely ignored by liberal audiences and critics. Sienkiewicz and Marx (2024) are among those at least partially attributing Trump's second electoral win to the insularity of liberal comedy and the preaching-to-the-converted approach of many late-night shows, a formerly lucrative portion of the U.S. entertainment industry now losing its cultural and economic relevance. In this respect, Becker (2025) noticed the politicisation of liberal late show hosts that followed the first Trump election has indeed wound up reinforcing forms of social group formation that polarised their viewers, a phenomenon counter-intuitive to the notion that comedy is a supposedly universalist value that brings people together — and that, for this reason, Bown (2024) has referred to as "post-comedy".

The platform turn: Rise of the embedded skeptic

Between the two main partisan network blocks, however, a more hybrid kind of comedy has also been eroding online viewership, and arguably giving Trump a critical boost: podcasting comedians. While notably not especially concerned with politics in their comedy acts, these podcasters have become influential cultural interlocutors for campaigning politicians and "contrarian" voices. Joe Rogan's influential JRE podcast is the most high-profile example in this category (Marcus, 2024), but other notable names within the so-called "Rogansphere" are Theo Von, Tim Dillon, Andrew Schulz, and Tony Hinchcliffe. With the exception of the latter, these stand-up comedians all host podcasts where comedy is not the central output, and riffing on social/political commentary, often bouncing off non-comedy guests, has become preferred content.

This formula was notably inspired by JRE itself: initially focused on comedians and MMA fighters, over the years Rogan's own podcast has increased its attention on politics (Rasheed, *et al.*, 2025), with a particular interest in and defensive attitude around masculinity (O'Sullivan, 2025; Scott, 2025) and an audience that shares cultural rather than political affiliations (Stecula, *et al.*, 2025). This political skepticism has undoubtedly been an asset for Rogan, who has however endorsed outsider candidates like Bernie Sanders (Krieg, 2020), and publicly favoured Trump over Biden (Lutz, 2020). Nonetheless, Rogan's first interview with Trump came only after other podcasters had featured him, and even after Trump had personally attacked Rogan on Truth Social for previously endorsing his then-competitor Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. (Roeloffs, 2024). After Trump's appearance on JRE on 26 October 2024, the official endorsement finally arrived, at the last minute, after Rogan was convinced by Elon Musk (FitzGerald, 2024).

Significantly, the convergence of Rogan, Musk, and Trump was facilitated, at least discursively, by a particular framing of comedy. During the interview with Trump, in fact, Rogan bonded with Trump over liberal media ostracism and mixed martial arts fandom, but also identified with him as a comedian, to the point of praising his comedic timing (Joe Rogan Experience, 2024). Comedy was also a discursive touchstone for Musk at different points of intersection with Trump's trajectory. The Tesla CEO, who presented his acquisition of Twitter at least in part as a response to correct the company's "grave mistake" of banning Trump for allegedly inciting the Capitol Hill riots (Singh, 2022), tweeted that comedy would be "legal again" the day after his takeover (Tangalakis-Lippert, 2022); at a CPAC event right after Trump's win, he reiterated the concept by theatrically exclaiming: "Legalize comedy!" (Jeong, 2025). How has comedy come to be brandished as a value for those on the political right?

Arguably, this discursive shift is part of a process that is at least two decades long, and deeply intertwined

with three factors: the perceived hegemony of left-wing politics among television comedians, the affordances of a developing Internet infrastructure that culminated in social media platforms as we know them, and a collective identification in the “comedian” as both a professional category and cultural avatar of the universalised value of free speech. This process encompasses comedians of different generations and political affiliations: those who were always Republican-leaning, and have found in online formats like podcasting an avenue away from mainstream channels (*e.g.*, Anthony Cumia); those who, like Russell Brand, were outspokenly on the left and were later “radicalised” by scandals, eventually finding the most lucrative re-platforming on alternative platforms (Isaacs, 2025); those whose success is native to Internet platforms and whose politics appear to be strongly linked to the conditions of their existence on those very platforms (*e.g.*, Andrew Schulz, Tony Hinchcliffe). While these comedians often refute an overt political label, there have been attempts from the U.S. right to claim their brand of edgy, politically incorrect comedy for a while.

De-politicisation and re-politicisation

Anderson (2005) examined examples like *Vice* magazine, talk radio, and *South Park* as symptoms of a widespread decline in what he considered a left-wing consensus across mainstream media, triggered by a decentralisation of media that was yet to take the shape as we now know. The term “South Park conservative” itself derived from “South Park Republican”, a label previously coined by Andrew Sullivan to describe a type of Republican with centre-right, libertarian views (Sullivan, 2003). Other terms associated with it were “South Park refugee”, which gives an idea of how the cartoon’s political alignment is more of a “de-alignment” with party politics than an allegiance in itself (Tierney, 2006), and even “classical liberal”. This comedy-to-conservative pipeline might be familiar to those following the interesting trajectory of Dave Rubin: a former comedian and mostly progressive commentator working with the left-wing, YouTube-based media company The Young Turks, he has since become a notable member of the intellectual dark Web (Weiss, 2018). This controversial anti-woke constellation, which came to Internet prominence in the wake of the first Trump election, notably included figures like Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro, as well as Rogan.

It is significant that this kind of “comedy conservative” is most times closer to a libertarian, and that freedom of speech and “equal opportunity offense” seem to be the most urgent issues in their discourse, usually framed as universal values opposed to the particularities of identity politics and the threat of “cancel culture”. While South Park represents a very different media object compared to podcasting, which is the focus of this paper, the example is important because it exemplifies the discursive framing of Internet-aware, politically incorrect humour as at least anti-liberal, if not conservative. Significantly, this aligns not only with statements made by Musk, but also with a broader discursive ethos that I have previously called “roast universalism” (Bozzi, 2025) — the conflation of edgy, politically incorrect, offense-driven comedy and free speech as a wider societal value, juxtaposed against the situated claims of “woke” identity politics.

The margin of ambiguity left by this framing is, however, quite important. Despite being credited for Trump’s electoral success, since the election Rogan and other podcasting comedians have returned to resisting assimilation into “the right” and even criticised violent and indiscriminate deportations at the hands of ICE agents (CNN, 2026). While the comedians’ own conservative inclinations should not be underplayed (deportations were promised ahead of the election), it is important to explore the infrastructural dimension of their role, and how it plays into their ideological alignment. As argued by Sienkiewicz and Marx (2022), rather than strongholds of the right, Internet institutions like JRE act in fact more as traffic hubs, ushering social media viewers from general mainstream media skepticism into radicalisation pipelines. This infrastructural role, and vested interest in the circulation of edgy content, is evident in the “cancel discourses” (Ng, 2022) of podcasting comedians — discussions focused on the issue of “cancel culture” and its rising influence on public and platform policies (especially content moderation). These recurring discourses demonstrate the perennial concern of podcasting comedians with the threat of censorship or deplatforming, simultaneously framed as an existential risk for the industry and a dangerous societal slippery slope. With the rising cultural and legal pressures on platforms to moderate content (Gillespie, 2018; Kumar, 2019) and the platform-dependent logics of the culture industries those comedians

are embedded in (Colbjørnsen, 2024; Isaacs, 2025), the performative relatability, artistic ambivalence, and professed political agnosticism of podcasting comedians make them especially defensive, framing themselves as “the last line of defense” for free expression online. This often results in comedians turning their podcasts into catalysts for public discourse about Internet infrastructures, as well as broader political issues far beyond comedy. Discussing the culture wars has in fact made JRE the most influential podcast in the world, named regularly within accounts of the anti-woke world and courted by both the Trump administration and the tech right, whose most high-profile names (*e.g.*, J.D. Vance, Marc Andreessen, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel) often use JRE as an agenda-setting environment to send messages to the institutions and the public. Beyond the personal political allegiances of individual comedians, then, what is interesting about the public framing of the Rogansphere is the way the comedic ethos it cultivates triangulates with the political economy of digital platforms as well as traditional party politics.

Tony Hinchcliffe: Roast comedy as infrastructural discourse

> “There’s a lot going on. I don’t know if you know this but there’s literally a floating island of garbage in the middle of the ocean right now. I think it’s called Puerto Rico.” — Tony Hinchcliffe at a Trump Rally in Madison Square Garden, 27 October 2024

Before uttering these remarks, Tony Hinchcliffe was mostly unknown to the majority of the U.S. public. The comedian admitted a political rally was not the most appropriate context for his brand of “roast comedy”, an established genre founded on politically incorrect stereotypes and equal-opportunity offenses; yet, despite receiving backlash from high-profile entertainment and political figures like Bad Bunny and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (McCausland and Hayes, 2024), he apologised to “absolutely nobody”, arguing that he thought Puerto Ricans were smart enough to know when they were being used as “political fodder” (Howard, 2024). To be fair, those comments would not have made much noise at a Comedy Central roast in the mid-2000s, and Hinchcliffe’s artistic ethos was indeed defended by the famously liberal comedian Jon Stewart (Clark, 2024). As for Donald Trump, while the then presidential candidate did distance himself from the comic after the incident, the joke did not seem to have any impact on electoral results. It did, however, boost Hinchcliffe’s notoriety. As the host of successful live comedy podcast Kill Tony, which counts millions of followers on YouTube and fills arenas when touring internationally, Hinchcliffe arguably did not need the push. Nonetheless, the comedian doubled down by releasing a 30-minute set titled “Garbage”, recorded at Joe Rogan’s own Comedy Mothership comedy club in Austin, Texas on 19 November 2024 and released exclusively on Elon Musk’s X platform on 30 November 2024 (with 1.1 million views as of 29 March 2026). The special constitutes an important media object to illustrate the cultural role comedians like Hinchcliffe play in the context of platformisation, and how the politicisation or de-politicisation of their personas represents a discursive asset.

In this respect, the sociological notion of “edgework” coined by Lyng (1990) is useful. In Lyng’s theory, edgework consists in highly risky activities that are voluntarily undertaken at the edge of cultural norms and physical safety, for example in extreme sports [2]. Scholars of digital culture have applied Lyng’s theory to a range of practices across digital and physical environments — *e.g.*, e-sports (Raggiotto and Scarpi, 2023), sharing nude selfies (Hart and Billett, 2025), “skirting” housing norms in the context of AirBnB (Makkar, *et al.*, 2021). When it comes to podcasting comedians and platforms, the notion of edgework is especially relevant because it constitutes both a discursive frame (*e.g.*, “what I am doing is risky”, as commonly presented in “cancel discourses”) and a potentially material push of what is allowed or not allowed on a platform in terms of content — *e.g.*, Joe Rogan using his podcast to re-platform Alex Jones to Spotify, after he had been previously de-platformed on YouTube (Bozzi, 2025). Even when comedic discourse does not shift the Overton window, however, the characteristically provocative framing of platformed comedy still

results in a form of discursive platform edgework, through which platform norms are openly discussed and even negotiated. As I explain in this section, the comedian's persona becomes a functional infrastructural node in this negotiation, stitching together disparate platforms and publics.

Kill Tony and the Roganisation of Austin

Before discussing the special proper, some context on Kill Tony and Hinchcliffe is needed. Previously entitled Hinchcliffe's Notes, Kill Tony is a live podcast started in June 2013 by host Tony Hinchcliffe (a former Comedy Central roast writer, Comedy Store regular, and Rogan protégé) and co-founder Brian Redban (previously a co-founder of the Joe Rogan Experience). Despite evolving over the years, the format is consistent: randomly selected comedians ("bucket pulls") perform one minute of stand-up, followed by feedback and an interview that often becomes a brutal roast at their expense. For comedians, this formula has created a stage-to-career pipeline, launching many "regulars" and "Golden Ticket winners" (who can perform without being pulled from the bucket). While the random selection draws people from diverse backgrounds, including trans, neurodivergent, and disabled individuals, critics note a tendency towards sexist and racist tropes, an obsession with trans jokes, COVID scepticism, and even MAGA talking points (for example, one of the most popular bucket pull interviews was a woman who participated in the Capitol Hill riots). In this respect, the show's political profile has become more pronounced after its move from Los Angeles to Austin, mirroring the relocation of Joe Rogan himself in 2020. This move was arguably driven in part by the Californian lockdown laws, which hindered live comedy, but also reflects a broader trend of moving to Texas for lower costs and a burgeoning tech industry — an environment that is especially attractive to unorthodox political voices and podcasters carving out their audiences outside the mainstream, mainly on digital platforms (Lewis, 2024). In this respect, Kill Tony guests, who also participate in interviews on the show, range from Rogan and sympathizing comedians (from the Rogansphere or not) to athletes, rappers, and, notably, controversial figures like Jordan Peterson, Alex Jones, or Tucker Carlson. The guest selection demonstrates how the podcast is not only part of the "Roganisation" of the Austin comedy scene — cemented by the opening of the comedian's own club, the Comedy Mothership, in 2023 (Hibberd, 2023) — but also an integral part of the Rogansphere as a cultural sphere of influence (for example, Tucker Carlson rolled in as a guest on Kill Tony right after recording an episode of JRE). Not unlike JRE itself, Kill Tony has also become a force to be reckoned with, and an increasingly established one, platform-wise: just like Joe Rogan discusses cancel culture on major platforms like YouTube and Spotify, Kill Tony exhibits its brand of "anti-cancel culture" comedy in the context of arena shows and, more recently, in a series of Netflix specials. Observers have attributed the show's success to different phenomena: on one hand, the most critical see it as a pure expression of Trump's America (Simons, 2025), while others see it as reflective of "how stressful comedy became after it was asked to carry so much political weight" (Winkie, 2025). These accounts resonate a lot with the antagonistic trends of de-politicisation and re-politicisation of comedy discussed in the previous section.

As for Hinchcliffe himself, he has never hidden his COVID skepticism or Trump admiration on the podcast, but after the 2024 elections he has also denied being "far right", even framing himself as a centrist in a conversation with Bill Maher (Club Random Podcast, 2025). Rather than Hinchcliffe's personal voting history, it is here more interesting to consider his relationship with platforms and platforming. Hinchcliffe had a Netflix special as early as 2016, which was poorly received and has since disappeared from Netflix and Spotify (Kelly, 2025). The comic was, however, involved in a "cancellation" of sorts, after he racially insulted Asian-American comedian Peng Dang in a live set, leading his agents to cut their working relationship (Lewis, 2021) and Antone's Nightclub, which was hosting Kill Tony at the time, to drop the show (Faires, 2021). Since then, even despite the Trump rally backlash, the comedian and his podcast have only become more famous and influential, with Hinchcliffe making a notable appearance at the highly-streamed Roast of Tom Brady on Netflix and securing three Kill Tony specials on the same platform (Moore, 2025).

How does Hinchcliffe's infamous comedic persona navigate his "influencer imaginary" (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021) and make sense of both the idea of "cancel culture" and his own sky-rocketing success? And how does this discursive reconciliation play into the (de)politicisation of platforms as infrastructures for

public speech?

“Garbage”: (De)politicisation of the roast comedian

Hinchcliffe’s post-rally controversy release (Hinchcliffe, 2024) opens with footage of the comedian nervously walking behind black curtains and then onto the MSG stage, as American flags wave and the U.S. national anthem plays. An abrupt transition, accompanied by tense music, delivers the title: “Garbage: A comedy set from Tony Hinchcliffe”. Right after that, Joe Rogan announces his “brother” Hinchcliffe from the stage of his own Mothership club, as someone they might recognise from the Tom Brady roast and the host of the number one podcast for comedy in the world. This framing is presenting Hinchcliffe as both a household Rogansphere comedian and also a Netflix-famous act, which suggests a wider audience. To triumphant music, Hinchcliffe walks on stage wearing a cowboy-style black shirt, decorated with skulls and roses. After inviting the audience to give it up once again for Joe Rogan, Tom Segura, and Ari Matti (all of whom are familiar names to JRE and Kill Tony), he asks them if any of them is having as good of a month as he has (the special was recorded 23 days after the New York incident) and announces there was a 26 percent increase in the Puerto Rican vote. Nodding and smiling with satisfaction, he says “You are welcome. Turns out garbage has a good sense of humor.” This opening marks a vindication in terms of both his audience — which was not alienated by the comment — and, implicitly, the “cause” of the Trump election (“You are welcome”). This way, Hinchcliffe presents comedy as a universal value, but also hints at a specific political allegiance. Right after that, he calls out the “proud Latinos” in the audience — when they cheer, he remarks it was nice knowing them, hinting at the fact Trump is going to start deporting them soon, and that with Musk’s rockets it will only take a few seconds back to Tijuana. After another couple jokes on deportation to space, he goes back to his own incident by saying it was not his intention to swing an election, as he never considered himself a very political guy. However, he specifies, about a month prior YouTube had introduced a new list of words that could demonetise content (C-word, F-word), and mentions how he was able to call Tom Brady the F-word on Netflix. This passage demonstrates two things: the comedian sees his own politicisation as depending (at least in part) on platform policies, and also that he favours the platforms that pay him the most. Then, he explains the backstory of his MSG set at the rally. He says he wanted to have Trump on Kill Tony alongside his Shane Gillis impersonation (a podcast favourite), and when he wasn’t able to secure that the Trump staff invited him to do the rally. He then recounts the high-security afternoon set, the awkwardness of following the national anthem, and his green-room interactions with Tucker Carlson and a profanity-averse Republican. Notably, Hinchcliffe expresses frustration when, minutes after the set, a KamalaHQ account labels him a “speaker” instead of a “comedian,” and he laments performing for free, paying for his own flight, and cutting a controversial joke, all without meeting Trump. He then jokingly expresses a desire for a political “upgrade” from his 15-year friendship with Joe Rogan, which is why he wants to be on the winning team and golf with Trump. The comedian also reflects on the post-gig fallout, ranging from being stood up by Johnny Knoxville and topping political fame charts to defending himself against racism allegations involving LeBron James and a woman in a bar. In between, he complains that the media incorrectly reported the joke he cut involved calling Kamala Harris the C-word, asserting, “I was there to tell jokes, not to tell truths.” Finally, yielding to audience demand to tell the controversial jokes that he actually cut out, he references Trump’s infamous remarks about immigrants eating pets by proposing the government fly immigrants from Ohio to Florida when hurricanes hit because “it rains cats and dogs” and those can cover all meals. Then the special ends, and Trump’s name can be seen in the “thanks” section as the credits roll.

Overall, “Garbage” represents a sort of “instant special” that offers a personal perspective on current events, rather than a polished set. Other comedians engage in this type of format, but in this case the comedian was in the news themselves, and the set is released as part of a counter-narrative to mainstream media. To reinforce this meta-narrative, the video is posted exclusively on Elon Musk’s X platform and, as discussed earlier, includes explicit references to other platform policies. The status of comedian is explicitly presented as non-political, while at the same time Hinchcliffe very clearly expresses a distaste for “libtards”, Kamala, and her celebrity supporters, while looking up to Trump and including some of his talking points in his jokes. As for Latinos, they are used as a recurring reference to reinforce the “roast universalism” (Bozzi, 2025) of the set. While several Rogansphere comedians have turned to political commentary and

conversations (*e.g.*, Rogan himself, Theo Von, Tim Dillon, Andrew Schulz), Hinchcliffe and Kill Tony are framed as a crucial anchor to the artistic integrity of comedy as an ambiguous art form, refusing political labels and aligning with the interests of certain platforms over others.

This ties in significantly with the aforementioned notion of platform edgework. Publishing "Garbage" on Elon Musk's X is an infrastructural choice, expressed clearly in the name of free speech and anti-wokeness. These "roast universalist" values, however, also refer to a very situated U.S.-exceptionalism: Hinchcliffe is not only choosing the platform that moderates the least, but aligning with the techno-political Musk-Trump axis and their mantra of lean government and strong borders. If this makes Hinchcliffe a somewhat paradoxical *partisan roast universalist*, in the next section I look at another side of discursive platform edgework: the perspective of fan-critics.

Platformed personality enforcement: The Rogan-Hatersphere

> "We say ... you know, in the comedy world we say we are the last line of defense. Because this is where the woke meets the wall, the woke meets the wall with stand-up comedy." [3]

Joe Rogan's unique relationship with U.S. stand-up comedy as a social milieu is crucial to understand his wider cultural influence. The comedian was television-famous before making a name in the industry as a legitimate stand-up, and it is no accident his special "Shiny Happy Jihad" opens by addressing how people in the audience might know him as "the Fear Factor guy" (Rogan, 2007). While that frames Rogan as a sort of insider/outsider, his relative economic stability, compared to the precarity of most of his comedy peers, arguably afforded him a level of independence from industry politics that counter-intuitively allowed him to become an integrity enforcer and self-appointed spokesperson for the category, a role he most famously played in a now Internet-legendary public confrontation with Carlos Mencia on stage at the Comedy Store, in 2005. At the time, Mencia had a popular show on Comedy Central, but was infamous for stealing jokes from less known comics. After calling him out publicly for his crimes against comedy, the "Fear Factor guy" was temporarily banned from the Comedy Store and his agency, which also represented the then lucrative Mencia, dropped him (Solomon, 2025). In the long run, however, Rogan's temporary cancellation (which made him an "outsider" to the Club) was worth it, while Mencia's reputation and career never recovered from the backlash. This precedent is quite crucial to understand the relationship between Rogan and comedy as a community of values, a "brotherhood" of sorts that protects its members (*e.g.*, from accusations of racism or sexual misconduct) and has evolved into what is now known as the "Rogansphere". Emerging organically around the second Trump election in November 2024, the term has become a widespread signifier for a network of comedian podcasters revolving around JRE, also representing a style of entertainment and comedy that focuses heavily on cancel culture tropes and, according to several high-profile critics (most notably comedians Marc Maron, Tim Heidecker, and Anthony Jeselnik) is hurting the comedy industry (Romano, 2025). At play is a fraught dispute around what comedy should be, how political comedians are, and how important. Conviction seems to vary across different Rogansphere members — even Hinchcliffe has admitted "cancellation" has been ultimately good to his own business (2lazy2try, 2024) — but, as seen in the discussion of Hinchcliffe's "Garbage" set, a narrative of self-importance is still there, coexisting with the "just joking" and "regular guy" tropes. In this section I discuss how it is debated through a counter-narrative established by a constellation of YouTube creators that I call the Rogan-Hatersphere.

This constellation comprises a range of YouTube accounts, whose content started to focus on Rogan and the Rogansphere between 2022 and 2024. Some notable representatives of the Hatersphere's core formats and aesthetics are 2lazy2try, Elephant Graveyard, Comedy Enforcement, Podcast Cringe, BeigeFrequency, Apologia Comedia, and American Redact — these accounts usually compile podcast clips accompanied by

voiceover commentary, sometimes enriched by more diverse content or context that requires deep familiarity with the material. I use the term "sphere" to emphasise the network's dependence on Rogansphere content for sourced clips, often repeated across videos and accounts, and the subsequent algorithmic grouping as per recommendation lists, tags, as well as overt reactions to or mentions of a creator in another's videos. Some of the Hatersphere's older accounts opened over a decade ago, discussing various Internet topics and personalities before zooming in on Rogansphere content (the most influential being Redbar, an Internet talk show that exists mostly off-YouTube, but has a strong fan presence on the platform), while the most recent started posting Rogansphere-critical content right away. Some creators might have gotten onto the Hatersphere bandwagon because of easy clicks, but it is evident many are comedy and even JRE fans, whose initial mentions of Rogan are in neutral or positive terms.

Haterverse creators often begin by targeting Rogan-adjacent comedians like Bert Kreischer, Brendan Schaub, and Tom Segura, critiquing their fast-tracked success as evidence of JRE's negative impact on comedy, while denouncing their perceived narcissism and prioritization of exploitative monetization over comedic talent. Another crucial theme is the pervasive self-importance of the Rogansphere, with Rogan himself serving as the primary target. Creators frequently ridicule his tendency to miss guest's jokes and his "canonized" claims that comedians are the world's "last line of defense" against woke culture. This thread also feeds into a more serious Hatersphere take on JRE, which is its political shift and ultimate Trump endorsement. Special mention in this respect should be made of Secular Talk host Kyle Kulinski, a progressive political commentator that has been on JRE himself seven times, the latest being February 2023. Kulinski, who is a self-identified Lefty populist, is especially relevant because his very first videos about Rogan were about his defense of gay marriage and support for Bernie Sanders, emphasizing the link between JRE and the "Bernie bro" left (Kilpatrick, 2020). In recent times, Kulinski has however turned heavily against Rogan, called out his political affiliation with Trump and the tech right, and also promoted Hatersphere content from his own, much bigger platform (Secular Talk has over two million subscribers, while the second biggest account, 2lazy2try, is just over 400,000).

Fitting with Rosamond's (2023) model of "platformed personality capitalism", the existence of the Rogan-Hatersphere demonstrates Rogan's YouTube personality has indeed become a *medium* and a *platform infrastructure*: Hatersphere content does indeed tap into Rogan's personality as a material resource for images and soundbites, as well as a strategic algorithmic channel for traffic and clicks. It also significantly contributes to discursively define a specific type of "Rogansphere podcasting comedian" as a *performance genre*, reading into its capricious volatility and yet, collectively, defining it and essentialing it. Since this avatar of the Roganised stand-up comic is both challenged and reinforced, Hatersphere creators work as *platformed personality enforcers* — they make sure the Rogansphere is a co-defined entity, retaining a collective memory of narratives, roles, and values.

Counter-narratives and ecologies of criticism

The Hatersphere has become increasingly aware of itself, most likely because views keep going up and, not least, even Rogansphere comedians are acknowledging its existence more frequently and explicitly. In this respect, while each creator has a different aesthetic style, Elephant Graveyard stands out for the painstaking craftiness of his video essays — most notably, a trilogy on Rogan and the Rogansphere that counts millions of views per video. Here, I look at the trilogy as the main example of the account's cultural critique.

Part I: "Burn The boats" (2024)

This video essay deconstructs Rogan's live Netflix special using manipulative visual effects to highlight his onstage discomfort. The critique dismisses Rogan's material as half-hearted, focusing on his obsession with "poverty safari" social media and his defensive stance on misinformation and plagiarism. Despite labeling him a "stool-humper," the essay acknowledges Rogan as a modern-day Johnny Carson — an industry gatekeeper. It mockingly explores his emotional ties to the Comedy Store, ultimately framing his career as a "funeral" for comedy. This video birthed a "Hatersphere" sub-genre, gaining over five million views.

Part II: "How comedy became a dystopian imperial hell world" (2025)

Released post-2024 election and amassing over two million views, this installment adopts a macabre tone to lament the industry's decline. It disputes Rogan's status as a podcast innovator, instead tracing comedy's decay back to Dane Cook's "Internet fame over quality" model. The essay argues that Rogan's "approval hole" — stemming from father issues — has created a toxic culture of "emotional dictators." It suggests Rogan weaponizes his platform for validation, allowing figures like Elon Musk to adopt his blueprint of performative masculinity. The video concludes with a plea to "hug your sons," framing the Comedy Mothership as ground zero for a constructed, toxic reality.

Part III: "How comedy was destroyed by an anti-reality doomsday cult" (2025)

The 90-minute finale (with over three million views) posits a conspiracy theory: the Comedy Mothership is a "hyperreal simulacrum" designed to exploit primal fears. Rogan is depicted as a "god-king" leading an "Austin comedy toilet cult" supported by "techno-wizards" like Peter Thiel. The essay outlines several pillars of this system: enforced loyalty tests and mandatory praise for Rogan, comedians posing as anti-mainstream elites targeted by a "woke" mob, using shows like Kill Tony to abuse aspiring talent. The speaker concludes that Rogan is a puppet for a "Dark Enlightenment" billionaire death cult aiming to replace societal institutions with authoritarianism. To resist this psychological warfare, the video urges viewers to "anchor themselves in classic reality" and the physical world.

Apart from summarising all the main tropes within the Rogan-Hatersphere, this monumental trilogy demonstrates how Hatersphere creators not only use Rogan's likeness to anchor the networks of his viewers to their ecology of criticism, but can even contextualise nuanced takes on comedy as an art form within wider techno-political ideologies. Zooming in on the sweat stains forming on Rogan's nipples in his Netflix special may be just a funny way to poke fun at a powerful man, but it also highlights what is perhaps a blind spot in the discourse on comedy platforms: more (money, views, specials) in not always more, and the trickle-down effect of platformed success championed by Rogan himself cannot extricate itself from critique, especially when predicated on a free speech mantra. In this respect, the impact of the Hatersphere has been material: not only has some content allegedly been targeted via YouTube policies to be removed (LionMeows, 2024), but Rogansphere comedians are occasionally starting to mention and respond to videos by Elephant Graveyard (Apologia Comedia, 2025).

As mentioned earlier, Hatersphere creators may be motivated by their Patreons apart from fandom, but their importance lies in their deep familiarity with Rogansphere content, lore, and values. While mainstream media accounts of the "manosphere" may capture the wider demographic appeal of Rogan among young males, comedy fans can establish a different form of discursive negotiation with the Rogansphere as a phenomenon situated within the cultural industries, and thus dependent on platform dynamics that entail both forms of "influencer creep" (Bishop, 2025) and accountability to fan discourses. As I have examined throughout this paper, the latter significantly hinge on the social, cultural, and aesthetic codes of "comedy" as an "art world" (Becker, 1982) of its own, where linguistic integrity and a provocative register play as key imperatives.

Conclusion: Three shades of platformed comedy

This paper has analysed two very specific phenomena, both related to the rising influence of podcasting comedians as cultural and political interlocutors in an increasingly platformed public sphere. While these phenomena are contextually bound to the 2024 U.S. presidential election as a historical and cultural frame, they also offer wider insight into how comedy is currently used as a communicative register that plays into the development of collective platformed identities (most notably: professional, national, political, but also gendered).

Conceptually, I have applied Rosamond's (2023) framing of YouTube personality as infrastructure to the Rogansphere, exploring how the boundaries of this highly contested entity are negotiated both across different platforms and through the internal recommendation algorithms of YouTube. I also make a contribution to platform studies by introducing discursive platform edgework, a conceptual formula defining a process that actively challenges platform content policies as both an ideological target focus and algorithmic hook. This edgework addresses allegedly speech-restrictive platform policies in universal terms, however their implications are presented from a very situated perspective — in this case, that of primarily white, cis male comedians. I use the term "discursive" to emphasise how comedians use speech, rather than technical skills, to negotiate with platform boundaries, but this does not mean there is no material impact on platformed speech. The virality of "cancel discourses" (Ng, 2022) produced within and outside of the Rogansphere emphasizes the urgency of this edgework, at the same time broadening the viewership of previously more niche topics and speakers, *de facto* widening the Overton window (Simons, 2024). Podcasting comedians in fact represent a crucial community of content creators that navigate "platformed personality capitalism" (Rosamond, 2022) as "embedded skeptics" (Bozzi, 2025), existing on a hypothetical axis between two wider techno-cultural phenomena — the "politicization of comedy" and the "comedification of political commentary" — and adopting different yet often overlapping attitudes to platform edgework.

Firstly, they act as *edgework platformers* by establishing and framing their own podcasts as platforms for boundary-pushing content. Following a template established by Joe Rogan with JRE, podcasting comedians rely on the charisma of a comedic persona while retaining a content-agnostic attitude towards edgy ideas, riffing on punchlines while playing the "straight man" at once. The main advantage of playing such an "infrastructural" role (Sienkiewicz and Marx, 2022; Bozzi, 2025) is maintaining cultural and algorithmic relevance, appearing in user feeds as a visible interlocutor for topics within and outside of comedy. The flipside of that is the inspired banter of podcasting comedians becomes increasingly conducive to the interests of those who are able to infiltrate and exploit their discourse, as increasingly discussed within the Rogan-Hatersphere in relation to Rogan's proximity to the tech right and Trump government milieus (2lazy2try, 2025a; 2025b). In this case, comedy functions merely as a backdrop, ambient feature, with techno-political issues taking centre stage.

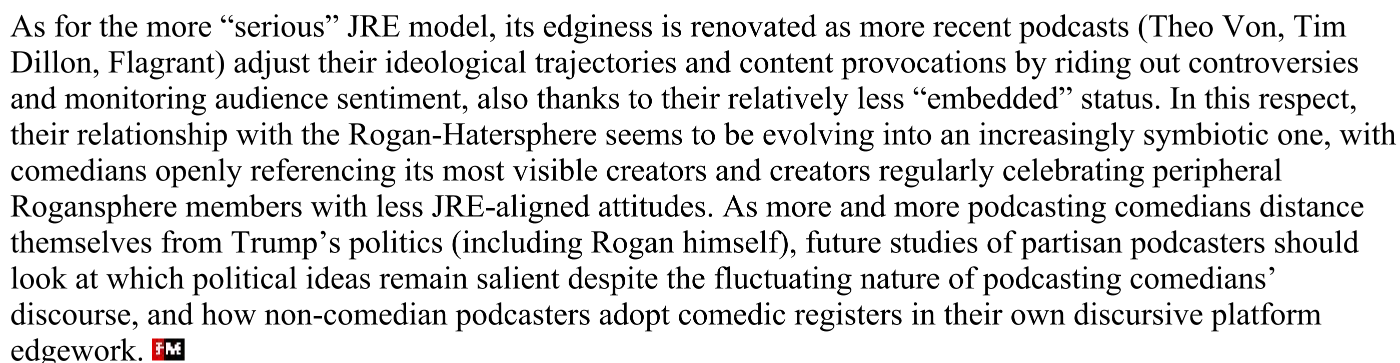
The second position is that of *partisan roast universalists*, with distinct individual attitudes towards politics and comedy that are marked by a certain ambiguity. Rogan and Hinchcliffe's own conservative tendencies (*e.g.*, in terms of gender identity and immigration) are not to be discounted, but the JRE interview and their ultimate endorsement of Trump reveal an alignment based significantly on platforming as a techno-cultural imperative, and comedy as a mode of expression. Despite flaunting their proximity to figures like Trump and Musk as a de-politicized platform commodity, however, they still frame their work as breaking from mainstream media logic. This process of neutralization positions comedy as a universalist platform value, revealing the cynical, U.S.-exceptionalist side of a creative class increasingly aligned with tech-industrial interests.

The third role on this personality axis is that of the Rogan-Hatersphere, whose network of *platformed personality enforcers* provides a contrarian force that anchors these "roast universalists" to audience accountability. While Rogan attempts to navigate his status as the "god-king" of an Austin-based "anti-reality," the Hatersphere retains a digital memory of his contradictions. In a landscape where comedy and politics are strategically made to blur, this adversarial network (to be sure, itself shaped by the logics of platformed visibility and circulation) remains a notable agent of friction against the total transformation of comedy into a tool for technocratic propaganda. The Hatersphere thus re-politicises comedy by disentangling it from the universalism proposed by the JRE model, making podcasting comedians accountable for their political alliances.

Having established these coordinates, some final considerations are due.

The first is this paper has discussed the politicisation of Kill Tony through the public persona of its host, Tony Hinchcliffe. As for the podcast itself, its stand-up-bound format constitutes an outlier within the

Rogansphere, but it serves as a vital anchor to the comedy industry as a core demographic and community of values. As its regulars start podcasting careers of their own, Kill Tony has evolved into its own engine for perpetuating JRE's infrastructural edgework. It enables Rogan to preserve the edginess of an extended Rogansphere, cultivate new comedy talent for JRE, promote the Comedy Mothership, and promote roast comedy as a cultural platform currency, even as its lead platformer has transitioned from a libertarian skeptic to a tame interlocutor for platform capitalists like Marc Andreessen and Mark Zuckerberg.



As for the more "serious" JRE model, its edginess is renovated as more recent podcasts (Theo Von, Tim Dillon, Flagrant) adjust their ideological trajectories and content provocations by riding out controversies and monitoring audience sentiment, also thanks to their relatively less "embedded" status. In this respect, their relationship with the Rogan-Hatersphere seems to be evolving into an increasingly symbiotic one, with comedians openly referencing its most visible creators and creators regularly celebrating peripheral Rogansphere members with less JRE-aligned attitudes. As more and more podcasting comedians distance themselves from Trump's politics (including Rogan himself), future studies of partisan podcasters should look at which political ideas remain salient despite the fluctuating nature of podcasting comedians' discourse, and how non-comedian podcasters adopt comedic registers in their own discursive platform edgework.

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Notes

1. Rosamond, 2023, pp. 257–258.

2. Lyng, 1990, p. 852.

3. "Joe Rogan Experience #2083 — Taylor Sheridan," at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fm9N-lyNQms.

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