

NY TIMES

America 2022: Where Everyone Has Rights and No One Has Responsibilities

Feb. 8, 2022

By [Thomas L. Friedman](#)

Opinion Columnist

The [conflict between Neil Young and Joe Rogan](#) over the anti-vaccine propaganda Rogan spreads through his podcast triggered a heated debate over the boundaries of free speech on platforms like Spotify and whether one entertainer — Young — had the right to tell Spotify to drop another — Rogan — or he'd leave himself. But this clash was about something more than free speech.

As a journalist who relies on freedom of speech, I would never advocate tossing Rogan off Spotify. But as a citizen, I sure appreciated Young calling him out over the deeper issue: How is it that we have morphed into a country where people claim endless “rights” while fewer and fewer believe they have any “responsibilities.”

That was really Young's message for Rogan and Spotify: Sure, you have the right to spread anti-vaccine misinformation, but where's your sense of responsibility to your fellow citizens, and especially to the nurses and doctors who have to deal with the fallout for your words?

This pervasive claim that “I have my rights” but “I don't have responsibilities” is unraveling our country today.

“We are losing what could be called our *societal immunity*,” argued Dov Seidman, founder of [the How Institute for Society](#). “Societal immunity is the capacity for people to come together, do hard things and look out for one another in the face of existential threats, like a pandemic, or serious challenges to the cornerstones of their political and economic systems, like the legitimacy of elections or peaceful transfer of power.”

But societal immunity “is a function of trust,” added Seidman. (Disclosure: Seidman is a donor to my wife's museum, [Planet Word](#).) “When trust in institutions, leaders and each other is high, people — in a crisis — are more willing to sublimate their cherished rights and demonstrate their sense of shared responsibilities toward others, even others they disagree with on important issues and even if it means making sacrifices.”

When our trust in each other erodes, though, as is happening in America today, fewer people think they have responsibilities to the other — only rights that protect them from being told by the other what to do.

When Rogan exercised his right to spread misinformation about vaccines, and when Spotify stood behind its biggest star, they were doing nothing illegal.

They were just doing something shameful.

Because the Rogan podcast episode that set off the controversy, an interview with [Dr. Robert Malone](#), who has gained fame with discredited claims, completely ignored the four most important statistical

facts about Covid-19 today that highlight our responsibilities — to our fellow citizens and, even more so, to the nurses and doctors risking their lives to take care of us in a pandemic.

The first three [statistics](#) are from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's latest surveys. First, unvaccinated adults 18 years and older are 16 times more likely to be hospitalized for Covid than fully vaccinated adults. Second: Adults 65 and older who are not vaccinated are around [50 times](#) more likely to be hospitalized for Covid than those who have received a full vaccine course and a booster. Third: Unvaccinated people are [20 times](#) more likely to die of Covid than people who are vaccinated and boosted.

The fourth statistic is from [a survey](#) from the staffing firm Cross Country Healthcare and Florida Atlantic University's College of Nursing, released in December. It found that the emotional toll and other work conditions brought on by the pandemic contributed to some two-thirds of nurses giving thought to leaving the profession.

A McKinsey [study](#) last month about the stress on nurses quoted Gretchen Berlin, a registered nurse and McKinsey partner, as saying: "Many patients, especially at the start of this, had only the nurses with them for those final moments, and I'm not sure that we've provided the decompression space for what that does to an individual who has to see that and support people through that over and over again. ... The level of stress that individuals are dealing with is going to have massive implications on everyone's well-being."

My friend Dr. Steven Packer, president and C.E.O. of Montage Health and Community Hospital in Monterey, Calif., told me that many hospitals today are experiencing an unprecedented 20 percent annual turnover rate of nurses — more than double the historical baseline. The more nurses leave, the more those left behind have had to work overtime.

"We have hard-working frontline staff in critical care settings stretched thin caring for critically ill Covid patients — with the overwhelming majority of those patients having a potentially avoidable illness had they only been vaccinated," explained Packer. "It is disheartening and distressing."

Especially when so many dying unvaccinated patients tell their nurses, "I wish I had gotten vaccinated," [according](#) to the American Hospital Association.

But as Wired magazine columnist Steve Levy [wrote](#) last week in a critique of Rogan's three-hour Spotify interview with Malone, none of these statistics were mentioned during that podcast.

"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," wrote Levy, "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."

Instead, "the entirety of the podcast makes it clear that Rogan and Malone are on the same team," Levy added. "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*." There is no mention of the numerous studies that "unvaccinated people are many, many times more likely to be hospitalized or die."

That was Rogan's right. That was Spotify C.E.O. Daniel Ek's right. But who was looking out for the doctors and nurses on the pandemic front lines whose only ask is that the politicians and media influencers who are privileged enough to have public platforms — especially one like Rogan with an average of 11 million listeners per episode — use them to reinforce our responsibilities to one another, not just our rights.

I'll tell you who was defending them: Neil Young.

Listen to the last line of Young's statement when he pulled out of Spotify: "I am happy and proud to stand in solidarity with the frontline health care workers who risk their lives every day to help others."

Rogan has vowed to do better at counterbalancing controversial guests. He could start by offering his listeners a 186-minute episode with intensive care nurses and doctors about what this pandemic of the unvaccinated has done to them.

That would be a teaching moment, not only about Covid, but also about putting our responsibilities to one another — and especially to those who care for us — at least on a par with our right to be as dumb and selfish as we want to be.