

The Joe Rogan Experience: Ideological Semiotics

Introduction

The Joe Rogan Experience (JRE) is one of if not the most influential podcasts of all time. It has over two thousand episodes in its collection with hundreds of millions of views. It has come under fire in recent years for promoting misinformation and controversial topics (*On the Media*). A list of the controversial topics includes COVID-19 misinformation, anti-vaccination sentiment, and use of insensitive terms (Colbjornsen). All hallmarks of the right-wing ideological landscape today. Despite, and maybe because of, this controversy, it remains wildly popular, consistently finishing at or near the top of the podcast charts and is classified as a comedy. Taking all these things into consideration, I have arrived at the conclusion that the show has succeeded at creating a machine disguised as entertainment that delivers ideology to its listeners. This paper will use several different composition and rhetorical theories to map out the way that the Joe Rogan Experience is able to answer the question: how does the JRE disseminate right-wing ideology so effectively?

I will use Wardle and Kain as a frame to examine activity theory in the JRE. Activity theory shows how various aspects of activity systems interact with one another. By examining the various components of the JRE activity system, we can gain a deeper insight into the structure of the show. I will incorporate the work of semiotic modalities put forward by Bezemer and Kress and Cynthia Selfe to analyze the impact of sound, video, and environment on the audience. Finally, I will use Bawarshi's theory of genre and Gee's theory of semiotic domains to examine how the host Joe Rogan interacts with the audience and facilitates audience interaction, disseminating information more broadly. Using these frames has allowed me to identify four main ideas within Rogan's ideological machine.

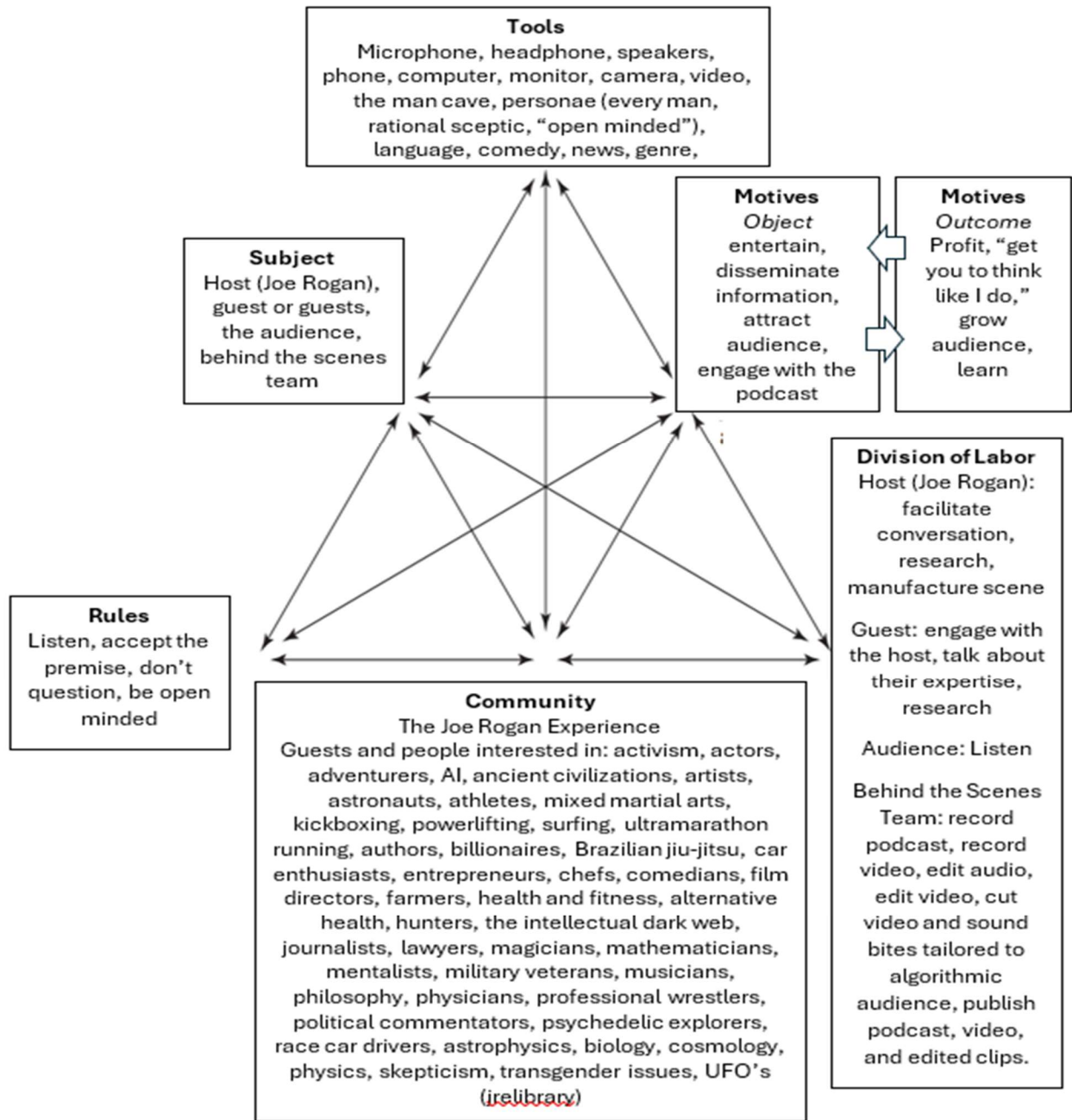
Rogan utilizes many different talking points, however there are four that are foundational to his ideology. They are discussed the most frequently and they each serve a distinct purpose around which other ideas can be put forward. The first pillar is that Rogan is apolitical. The second pillar is a distrust of large corporations, specifically legacy media, and big pharma. This paper in no way attempts to suggest that there are no problems in these industries. It only seeks to point out that Rogan utilizes these issues to serve his own ends. The third pillar is an appeal to elitist individualism. The final pillar is anti-woke rhetoric. Now that I have identified the pillars, I will use the theoretical frames below to show the rhetorical moves that build these pillars.

The Joe Rogan Experience Activity System

I will map the JRE activity system and how the different elements influence one another. By mapping out and analyzing an activity system, it leads to a deeper understanding of the activity (Wardle 279). Traditionally this analysis explains how various parts of an activity system collaborate to anticipate a participant's needs and goals. However, this paper will analyze the interactions of distinct parts of the activity system not to anticipate participants' needs, but rather to spotlight how fringe ideas are propagated, and alternative truths are constructed. Rather than making an activity map for each episode of the JRE, an overarching activity map reveals how the system operates as a whole and how the interplay of parts disseminate disinformation and ideology.

The subjects involved in the JRE podcast are the host Joe Rogan, the guests on the show, the behind-the-scenes team, and the audience. The subjects make up the community by using tools, dividing up labor, and following the rules to achieve long-term and short-term goals. Rogan and the behind-the-scenes team use microphones, headphones, computers, monitors, cameras, and video to interact with the community. Rogan creates the man cave aesthetic along

with his personae to facilitate conversation and manufacture the scene of the podcast which is the incubator for ideology. Rogan and his guest or guests use language, comedy, news, genre, and conversation to entertain the audience. The audience uses headphones, speakers, a phone, a computer, and a monitor to consume the podcast.



The rules involved are essential to the way that ideology is constructed, because they are part of the ideology itself. The rules are easy enough: listen, accept the premise, do not question, be open minded (which might seem contradictory, but this contradiction will be further explained below). By following the rules, the audience is more susceptible to the goals of the guest, host, and behind-the-scenes-team.

The goals vary across subjects, but they work together and interact recursively. For instance, one of the short-term goals is to entertain and this helps to attract new audiences which need to be entertained anew. Short-term goals work together to achieve long term goals of profiting and disseminating ideology. It is not much of a leap to see the way that the long-term goals help facilitate the short-term goals. Profit allows the podcast to continue. It encourages new guests to come on the show. It allows the behind-the-scenes team to get paid so more shows can be made. Profit also leads to what Rogan refers to as “fuck you money,” the idea that the more money he accumulates the more untouchable he will become, and this will further allow his ideology to be spread (Bozzi 76). Having shown how the JRE activity system functions, I will now examine how its multimodal construction reinforces the activity system and the four pillars through sound and image.

Semiotic Modes

In this section, I will explore the way that the semiotic construction of sound in the form of speech and conversations enables host and guest to make meaning and distribute ideology. I will examine the way that Rogan has mastered the elements of speech to emphasize a point, guide the audience towards conclusions, and undermine any resistance to his way of thinking. Then I will examine the way that different elements of the image are used to create a feeling of conversation and the way that this works to spread disinformation.

First, and most important for this primarily aural medium is sound. The JRE explores different elements of speech and their ability to create meaning. Speech can communicate a great deal of meaning through volume, rhythm, emphasis, tone of voice, and pace (Selfe 633). In an aural medium, as much as content, this is the way that meaning is constructed between the different subjects of the JRE. The host Joe Rogan is an actor, stand-up comedian, sports commentator, and podcaster. Each of these fields focuses on the diverse ways that speech communicates meaning within specific content. He has spent his professional career dedicated to this craft and it would be impossible to separate these skills from his podcast production. Rogan's ability to modulate speech allows him to funnel the perception of the audience in a certain direction. By dictating the flow of conversation, he can make the rhetorical moves necessary to push forward his ideology. Speech modulation works in concert with the video elements of the podcast to achieve these ends.

The second mode that this paper will examine is the image,



Fig. 2: JRE Studio Long View



Fig. 3: JRE Studio Guest View



Fig. 4: JRE Studio Host View

particularly the “positions of elements in a framed space” (Bezemer and Kess 171) within the JRE studio where the podcasts are filmed. Fig. 2, 3, and 4 are snapshots of the most recent iteration of the JRE podcast studio from different angles. In the back of the room, there is a large monitor where a member of the engineering team can pull up videos on demand. Fig. 2, Fig. 3, and Fig. 4 show the podcast studio. The knickknacks, the neon sign, the enormous television, the rustic look of the wood all add to the man cave aesthetic. Rogan occasionally throws in a cigar smoking session, drinks heavily with more intimate guests, or famously smokes a joint with guests like Elon Musk. These may seem like innocent enough activities, but not when situated within a meaning-making modality that supports the goals of the sign maker Joe Rogan. These elements accentuate the illusion of intimacy that comes from casual conversation and invites the audience to be a party to this conversation. Audience members enter the constructed man cave and listen to the conversations that might ensue.

As the conversation progresses, the camera angle cuts back and forth between whoever is speaking. It is a familiar shot-reverse-shot that is the most used tactic of establishing a conversation in the moving image (Sikov 68). Its familiarity allows viewers to slip into the conversation and remain oblivious to the fact that this conversation is a multimodal semiotic construction with an epistemological goal.

The monitor in the background might seem innocuous, but it is an incredibly important semiotic tool within the JRE. Whenever Rogan or the guest mentions a video, news article, or something from the internet Rogan will say “pull that up Jamie.” Jamie, the leader of the engineering team, mimics daily interactions among friends where memes or photos are shared mid-discussion. This lends credence to Rogan’s ideological pillars. They establish him as a rational outsider earnestly looking for the answers but never willing to be wrong.

Why is it so important that each JRE episode is situated as a natural conversation between two people? “Writing occurs through conversations and negotiations with others” (Vandenberg et al. 8). By positioning the podcast as nothing more than a conversation, the JRE is achieving two things. First, it facilitates engagement with disinformation. Conversation is how meaning making occurs and by illusorily breaking down the barrier between audience and sign maker; by immersing the audience in conversation, they can feel a party to the meaning-making process without ever contributing to the conversation. In other words, meaning or knowledge is made for the audience but the audience gets to feel like they were part of its construction. By feeling like they are a part of its construction, it is easier for the audience to absorb. Disinformation and ideology are hidden behind the curtain of conversation and are fed to the audience, all the while the audience feels like they were a part of its manifestation, as if it were a thought they had on their own. Now that I have shown the ways that semiotic modes are utilized within the activity system to construct and reconstruct the epistemic goals of the podcast, I will dive deeper into how genre helps understand how meaning is interpreted within the JRE semiotic domain.

Genre and Identity

I will examine the way that the JRE utilizes and manipulates genre to expand the discourse community and facilitate learning within the JRE’s constructed semiotic domain. “Genre’s shape and help us generate our communicative goals, including why these goals exist, what and whose purposes they serve, and how best to achieve them” (Bawarshi 23). The Joe Rogan Experience is a podcast. Podcasts alone carry their own set of goals, but when searching for the Joe Rogan Experience on any platform where you find podcasts it will be classified as a comedy podcast. A comedy podcast carries its own set of goals that will be different from say a

political podcast. When a listener is searching for a comedy podcast, they are certain to see the Joe Rogan Experience because it is consistently the number one comedy podcast, but what goals are the listener trying to fulfill? To laugh would certainly be at the top of the list. To find entertainment. To unwind after a long day. When the audience listens to the JRE they are putting in the effort to listen to the entire podcast, a multi-hour endeavor in which they will be fully engaged. Any lecturer should be jealous of this kind of engagement. Much of this engagement has to do with the desire of the listener and the ability to select the media that is situated in the genre they desire.

Although the JRE is categorized as a comedy podcast, it is not constrained by genre conventions and frequently explores a wide range of topics. The listener might be searching for a comedy podcast, but they stumble on something quite different. In this way, the JRE uses the comedy genre to blur the reality of its content and to disseminate disinformation more effectively to a wider audience.

The community of people who engage with the JRE is extensive as displayed in Fig. 1 under the community section. The vast number of different interests creates a series of different genres that carry with them their own set of preconceived notions and beliefs. They shape the desire of the audience while simultaneously shaping the direction that the conversation will go between host and guest. Rogan regularly undermines the expectations of genre to introduce ideological concepts to unexpected audiences. In this way he capitalizes on the genre his guest creates.

Rogan here is embodying the idea put forward by Bawarshi that “genre motive alone thus does not ‘do’ anything; it is a potential that requires individual interpretation and articulation for the motive to become actualized as social action” (91-92). The JRE is harnessing the power of

genre to attract an audience and then redefining genre within its semiotic domain. If genres are structures where ideology is naturalized (Bawarshi 7-8) then by manipulating genre, the JRE infuses it with a more concise and single-minded ideology. Once the listener engages with this new genre they are connecting to, often unintentionally, this ideology. Having explored all the theoretical frameworks above, I will now apply them to different episodes of the JRE and create ideological case studies.

Ideological Case Studies

I will analyze the way that three episodes of the JRE use genre and semiotic modes to disinform its audience and perpetuate an ideology. The guests of the shows that I analyzed are Dennis Quaid, Steven Rinella, and Kanye West. I chose them for their different relative genre's. Dennis Quaid is a famous actor. Steven Rinella is a writer who focuses on hunting and conservation. Kanye West is a famous musician, clothing designer, and media personality. Each of them is embedded in a different genre and therefore should shape the desire of the audience that engages with the JRE. The JRE exploits these expectations to draw an unsuspecting audience into an ideologically driven conversation. By examining these conversations, I will show how the JRE ideological pillars are disseminated to the audience, and the way that these work to support the goals of the activity system.

The first ideological pillar, the JRE is apolitical and devoid of ideology, relies on genre, particularly the conversational nature of the podcast. Rogan describes them as real conversations with real people to separate the content from ideological motives (JRE Quaid, JRE West, JRE Rinella). It is just people talking. It doesn't matter that he and Quaid spent most of the episode talking about how Democrats are only concerned with maintaining power, or that the first thing he and Rinella discussed was how President Trump had sat in the chair that Rinella was sitting

in, or that Kanye West was running for president when he went on the JRE (JRE Quaid, JRE West, JRE Rinella). In the episode with Rinella, Rogan states “I have no desire in any way, shape, or form to have anything to do with anything involving politics or I don’t wanna be in control of it” (JRE Rinella). This is an effusive dismissal of the idea that Rogan would have anything to do with the political world. Yet, within ten seconds of making this statement, Rogan relishes the fact that he had a massive impact on swaying the 2024 election (JRE Rinella). In fact, Rogan would be willing to argue that the reason he had such a significant impact on the election was because of his refusal to engage with politics and his dismissal of ideology. The contradiction is the way that they solidify their ideological status.

The second pillar of the JRE ideology that I have identified is that most of the world is completely and fundamentally entrenched in woke ideology without ever acknowledging the possibility of his own ideological proliferation. The way he channels this is by focusing on attacks on free speech and trans issues. With Rinella the trans issues and the attack on free speech are linked, citing Canada’s hate speech laws as examples of left wing woke ideology run rampant (JRE Rinella) Rogan cites having to use someones preferred pronoun as a particularly egregious violation of free speech rights (JRE Rinella). Yet, examining the change in Canadian laws that the JRE is referring to reveals not one reference to pronouns (CBC). This is a common tactic used in the JRE, making disingenuous statements steeped in ideology, designed to garner a reaction from the audience, without providing any evidence. With the form of the podcast, two-to-three-hours in length four times a week, it makes fact-checking incredibly difficult. However, this task would be a fruitless endeavor as ideology is not deconstructed through fact. Fact could and would be repurposed to perpetuate the ideology.

With Quaid, they discuss how democrats are the best at “turning things on their head” before going on a long rant about transgender athletes (JRE Quaid). Democrats are controlled by a big tech oligarchy and “so many people that are working for any tech company, they’re kids coming out of the universities. They’re all left-wing. There’s very few right-wing people involved” (JRE Quaid). Within a few short minutes Rogan would say the words: “thank God for Elon Musk” (JRE Quaid). In the real world, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Apple CEO Tim Cook, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew and Google CEO Sundar Pichai were front and center for President Trump’s inauguration (Swenson 1). Rogan signed a \$250 million deal with Spotify, one of the biggest music companies in big tech (Press). He is one of the most popular channels on YouTube, another one of the most influential big tech companies. The fact that Rogan benefits from and plays a not insignificant part in the success of the companies is never mentioned. These contradictions are the foundations of ideology.

The third ideological pillar is evident in the way Rogan consistently claims that the mainstream media is entrenched in left wing ideology stating: “The entire media establishment other than Fox News is completely against anything Republican” (JRE Quaid). Rogan’s YouTube channel alone gets more views than both CNN and Fox News. By refusing to recognize his place in the mainstream media, Rogan convinces his audience that he is providing them with an alternative viewpoint, one that is hidden by sinister actors on the mainstream left. This framing lets the audience see themselves as underdogs battling a monolithic left-wing media, overlooking that the JRE itself reaches a larger audience than most mainstream outlets. Once again, Rogan would argue that the reason he is so popular is because he is not a part of the mainstream media. Beyond the news, this media also extends to Hollywood which Rogan sights as being dominated by a single ideology. Yet, he is speaking to Dennis Quaid, a known

conservative who was in a 2025 Oscar nominated film and has had a long and successful career in Hollywood. This supports the idea put forward by philosopher Slavoj Zizek “an ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor” (50). The things that would undermine ideology are turned into exactly the sort of supporting evidence used to extend the ideology.

Another one of the enemies of the JRE are pharmaceutical companies. “Rogan: It’s very scary, this idea of these fucking eggheads experimenting with diseases and making them more infectious for whatever reason without developing a cure” (JRE Rinella). In this quote, Rogan is referring to both the theory that Lyme disease was created in a lab and that COVID-19 was the result of a lab leak. Because of the conversational genre of the show these things are stated as fact without citing any evidence. Rinella, the guest, does try to push back, but is quickly dismissed by Rogan. Rogan claims the pharmaceutical company is thoroughly damaged because of the money that is involved in the industry (JRE Rinella). He makes the noble assertion that money and medicine cannot go hand in hand, because this could lead to dangerous consequences. Rogan quickly pivots to Anthony Fauci and citing the book *The Real Anthony Fauci* by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (JRE Rinella). Rogan makes the bold assertion that the book was 100% true “and if it’s not true, he would be sued” (JRE Rinella). If we were to consider the alternative, say that Anthony Fauci did sue RFK Jr., it would be easy to see how this too would be used as evidence of the very truth of the piece. It would be an example of the mainstream trying to silence the underdogs bringing truth to light. Either story could be twisted to serve the ideological foundations of the JRE.

Beyond infectious disease, Rogan has a fascination bordering on the obsessive with the way the medical establishment deals with mental illness. This can be seen in the episodes with

Kanye West and with Dennis Quaid. West had a very public psychotic break and Kanye claims “They medicated me for saying slavery is a choice” (JRE West). Rogan quickly comes to West’s aid, stating that the quote was taken completely out of context and then pushes West to reveal what medication doctors prescribed West (JRE West). Rogan goes on to say that he wishes he would’ve known West because Rogan would have made sure that West did not take any of the medication, citing physical exercise and diet as solutions for West’s mental health issues (JRE West). While physical exercise and diet can be beneficial parts of addressing mental health issues. Rogan is not a doctor and in no way should be advocating for anyone to go off their medication. Yet, this serves to give Rogan the authority of understanding and discussing health problems with his audience. This helps to perpetuate ideology and give him credit with his audience, but it also serves the long-term goal of profiting from the show. Rogan owns a supplement company. These supplements are meant to help focus, brain function, daily support, offer essential nutrients, improve mood, sleep, performance, immune health, and digestive health (Onnit.com). While undermining the pharmaceutical company, Rogan can peddle his unregulated supplements on the side.

Finally, and perhaps the most dangerous assertion in relation to the pharmaceutical industry, comes from the episode with Quaid. Rogan spends a long stretch of the episode asserting that the 20-year-old attempted assassin of President Donald Trump, Thomas Matthew Crooks, was medicated, stating: “Rogan: I guarantee there was some sort of psychotropic medicine involved” (JRE Quaid). Rogan infers that this medication is in some way related to government mind control testing, a continuation of the MK Ultra experiments from the 1960s (JRE Quaid). In this move, he has united the pharmaceutical industry with the right-wing boogeyman known as the deep state, going as far as to ask: “Rogan: Was this a government

conspiracy to kill the presidential candidate?” (JRE Quaid). He receives no push back from Quaid. The conversation moves forward to discuss the Kennedy assassination, AI in the film industry, and immigration. All these subjects are placed on the same level of consideration as the idea that Crooks was under a cocktail of mind-control drugs and sent forward by the deep state.

The last pillar of the JRE ideological structure that I will examine is the ideological elitism perpetuated on the show. This is summed up with two quotes. One from the JRE Quaid episode “Rogan: I have a great faith in a certain percentage of the American people. There are so many people that are only fed by the mainstream media which is completely corporate controlled.” And the other comes from the JRE Rinella episode “Rogan: There’s just a lot of people that are cowards and they’re afraid of public humiliation, public criticism. They are afraid of getting ostracized from the community if they don’t follow suit like everybody else is.” These two quotes allow the audience to believe that they are a part of the special set of the population that is not a victim of ideology. After all, they are taking part in this podcast which undermines the mainstream media. They are receiving their information from a reliable source that is presented as devoid of ideology. However, they fail to recognize that they are now a part of a community which is afraid of public humiliation and public ostracization. If they were to stray from the ideology that Rogan has put forward and the JRE community is engaged in, then they would be ostracized. If they were to take a prescription for their mental health issues, suggest that the tech industry has plenty of right-wing pundits, or needed to wear a mask the community would ostracize them. This is visible in a quote from Rogan “I went to a restaurant the other night. The fucking guy who served me had a mask on. Like, I would fire this guy” (JRE Rinella). Rogan is not promoting a world devoid of ideology but is building an audience of people that conform to his ideology.

Conclusion

The JRE has created an incredibly effective epistemological semiotic domain in which the ideology of the sign-maker Joe Rogan is facilitated and perpetuated. The different elements of this semiotic domain are outlined by the activity system above and they reveal the various parts of the show and the ways that they operate. Genre function as a filter, and Rogan's mastery of various semiotic modes supports their creation and guides how audiences interpret the content. It allows the speakers to move quickly from topic to topic, navigating and intermingling genres, without requiring any sort of fact checking or relevant evidence to support the bold and often false or misleading claims they are making. These claims are linked to the ideology that is perpetuated by Rogan. Although Rogan hides this goal and frequently denounces others' ideologies to promote his own, he occasionally reveals his true intentions during these episodes. “Rogan: Oh, yeah. That’s the best part [about having a podcast]. Yeah. The best part is the unintended education” (JRE Rinella). “They’re going to get into you and they’re going to get into your ideas. And all these ideas that you have will become a part of their thought process” (JRE West). Rogan makes deliberate semiotic choices within an activity system, manipulated by semiotic modes, positioned within familiar genres, and aimed at attracting and converting an audience to Rogan's ideology. Understanding the semiotic mechanisms and rhetorical moves of ideological dissemination in media like the JRE is essential for developing media literacy and recognizing how rhetoric shapes public discourse.

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