02/09/2024 Why Taylor left TikTok

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <JCM\_JM\_0173\_10701\_Party\_We\_Rock\_\_b\_60\_\_APM>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (HOST): It’s been a big week for Taylor Swift and Drake. But they weren’t playing on one of their biggest platforms. Not a single one of their songs was on Tik Tok.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Instead we’ve got stuff like this:

*<CLIP>TikTok, swiftysvs   
Taylor Swift – Cruel Summer*

SEAN: And this:

<*CLIP>Tiktok, demetriusharmon*

*Justin Timberlake – Mirrors*

SEAN: And, good heavens, this:

*<CLIP> TikTok, wlambily*

*Mariah Carey - "We Belong Together"*

SEAN: On *Today, Explained* we’re looking into why the biggest record label in the world is picking a fight with the app that’s constantly promoting their artists. And why we’re all caught in the middle.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> TikTok Voice: You are listening to today, explained*

SEAN: Nilay Patel. Editor-in-chief of *The Verge*. You’re on TikTok, right?

NILAY PATEL (EDITOR IN CHIEF, The Verge): I'm on TikTok. As a viewer, I have a burner that no one knows about. But then I'm on TikTok on the Verge channels all the time.

SEAN: As a person with potentially multiple TikTok accounts. Can you tell me how important music is to the platform?

NILAY: TikTok is built on music.

*<CLIP> Savage by Megan Thee Stallion [starts up, then fades]*

NILAY: It came to this country as part of an acquisition. So ByteDance, which owns TikTok, bought a platform called Musical.ly, which was teenagers dancing to music.

*<CLIP> Tootsie Slide by Drake [plays for a bump, then fades]*

NILAY: And it has built itself on the back of people using music, making music for the platform, creating dance trends, recontextualizing music, bringing back old music

*<CLIP> Running Up That Hill by Kate Bush [plays for a bump, then fades]*

NILAY: All of TikTok is built around music. Music functions almost as the organizing principle of TikTok.

*<CLIP> [all music out]*

SEAN: But some days ago things got kind of quiet on TikTok. What happened?

NILAY: So Universal Music, which is the largest record label in the world, one of the most powerful record labels in the world. It represents Taylor Swift and Drake and Bad Bunny, you name it, pulled their music off of TikTok. And so TikTok is trying to bully us. They want to pay under the market rate for licensing our catalog. We're not going to accept the low rates our music has gone until TikTok can pay us like the major social network they are.

*<CLIP> Billboard, Sir Lucian Grainge On Issues Within The Streaming Era:*

*Grainge: I care more deeply about real music, and real opportunity, and real artists than I do algorithms pushing inexpensive things or fake products or fintech. I don’t like people cheating.*

SEAN: And like these musicians, you quote, you know, Bad Bunny, Drake, Taylor Swift, three of the biggest musicians in the world. Are they okay with this? They're good with all their music being ripped off TikTok?

NILAY: I think the big artists are totally okay with this. They all want more money. They know they're the lifeblood of the platform. They know the fans are going to seek them out regardless. It's the up and coming artists who get discovered on TikTok who become popular on TikTok that are probably the most worried. And that is an interesting split, is this conflict stretches out that has yet to come into the public consciousness. We haven't seen any evidence of that split being real, but over time, if this stretches on, I think that's the split we're going to see.

SEAN: Who who loses more here, Nilay, in this in this spat. Is it musicians? Is it labels or is it TikTok?

NILAY: Far and away the loser right now is TikTok.

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPMS\_0059\_03401\_Hold\_On\_Tight\_\_b\_60\_\_APM>

NILAY: You have an entire base of TikTok creators who you don't have access to the thing they care about the most, which is music. If you look at the bottom of every TikTok video, there's an audio file, right? It tells you what audio is being used. Oftentimes it's songs, most of the times even maybe it's songs. Those songs, if you click on them, you can see all the other videos that use that audio. That is how TikTok is organized. It is the first order bit of organization on TikTok and it's gone. It's silent. There are creators complaining that their entire archives of content are just muted because the music isn't there anymore.

*<CLIP> Tiktok, jarredjermaine: they took my sound origin videos down. They took my sample videos down!*

*<CLIP> TikTok, Rolling Stone - Conan Gray: Yea, i mean, my career is over for sure. I’m never gonna have a hit song ever again at this rate.*

*<CLIP> TikTok, noahkahanmusic: You know so my songs aren’t going to be on there anymore. I wont be able to promote my music on TikTok anymore. And, uh, you know, i’ll probably be okay right? I’ll land on my feet right?*

*<CLIP> Tiktok, jarredjermaine: UMG, just please put Taylor Swift back on the platform!*

SCORING OUT

NILAY: And if you cannot provide that value to your creators as a platform, suddenly they might start thinking that other platforms like Instagram Reels or YouTube shorts can provide that, audio can provide that audience, and they might spend time over there.   
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
NILAY: That hasn't happened yet. It's not been so many days. I think everyone is assuming that this will get resolved, but one of the main things a platform provides to its creators is licensing, is music licensing, is protection from copyright craziness is fair use, all of that stuff. Creators don't have to worry about it when they make content for a big platform. And right now, in the case of TikTok, they really have to worry about it.

SEAN: So how did TikTok let this happen?

NILAY: If you're running TikTok, you know that you are the engine of music discovery in America and possibly the world, and not just discovery of new artists.

SCORING CREEPS IN <Fleetwood Mac - Dreams>

NILAY: These massive music catalogs that are getting sold and resold for billions of dollars right now, they are becoming more valuable again because of TikTok. So old music is coming back around in style, hitting the charts again because of TikTok, which is wild to consider. That is not a thing that has happened previously in the history of music, that Stevie Nicks is just a superstar again, because a guy was skateboarding listening to Fleetwood Mac.

SEAN: <laughs>

*<CLIP> NPR INTERVIEW w/ STEVIE NICKS*

*Music in: Fleetwood Mac - Dreams (plays under)*

*NICKS: I'm gonna have to call him and thank him.*

*Ari Shapiro: Oh. you mean the tiktok guy. Yeah.*

*Nicks: The TikTok guy. Cause you have to understand, I'm not on TikTok. I’m not on instagram. I’m not on Facebook. I don’t have a computer. But I have to call him and tell him ‘thank you so much, because you know what you did? You brought this music back to the world all by yourself.*

*Music: (comes up! And then fades under Nilay)*

SCORING OUT

NILAY: That's TikTok, that's TikTok's power in the culture, and I think it is, on balance, a good thing. TikTok creates new artists, it creates new relationships with artists. It preserves fans relationships with older artists. It recontextualizes old music. There is a conversation happening about music and its place and culture that is new and I think fresh and interesting that is driven by TikTok. TikTok knows that's the value. Provides the music industry, and it knows the music industry doesn't have great answers of its own on how to break new artists …   
  
SEAN: Mmmm.

NILAY: … without social platforms, without TikTok. So I think it's saying to Universal. Hey, we're providing you all this value. You can go away. You won't have the ability to break any artists ever again. And they have run tests in Australia. They ran a test saying, we're not going to show new artists to people just to see what happens. What were they trying to prove? Hey, no new artists are breaking in the Australian market.  
  
SEAN: Mm!

NILAY: So TikTok is trying to demonstrate this leverage. And I think right now they're trying to say look that's the value we provide. It's not just dollars. And I think universal is saying yeah but your whole platform is built on the music that our artists make. You have to pay us for it. There's going to come a meeting of the minds. There will come a middle point. I don't think it's gonna the last forever, but that's TikTok's leverage, and I think they're very clear on it.

SEAN: This is all about money. So let's talk about money. How much was TikTok paying to license Universal's music and how much does universal want now?

NILAY: So we don't have hard numbers to go on. We can backtrack the numbers from a clue that universal put out, and it's a letter saying we're leaving TikTok. Universal said TikTok is 1% of our revenue. Universal is a public company, according to Music Business Worldwide, which is a trade publication. They backtrack the numbers. That means TikTok is paying Universal about $110 million a year.  
  
SEAN: Mmmm.   
  
NILAY: That's not a lot of money. Bigger platforms like meta are in the range of 200 to $300 million a year. That covers Instagram and Facebook. The streaming services like Spotify and YouTube pay vastly more money, so TikTok is a drop in the bucket of Universal's revenue. It's not a lot of money, but if you're universal and you're saying, okay, cruel Summer by Taylor Swift hit number one again when she went on tour because kids on TikTok were playing the song and dancing the song and thinking about the song, that's worth an awful lot of money. To TikTok. That is a cultural moment that TikTok ought to profit off of, and we deserve a huge percentage of that money as well.

SEAN: Do we know who might blink first here, TikTok or Universal?

NILAY: My instinct is that TikTok will blink first, and I have that instinct because I know that Universal won't. Right now, Universal, Universal CEO Lucien Grainge is pushing very hard against things like generative AI and platforms. They have pushed YouTube into a deal where YouTube is going to allow Universal to take AI generated copies of artists like Drake off the platform, which is not really in copyright law. There's no legal precedent for doing that. But Universal has so much power over YouTube, they said, give us that power anyway, and YouTube basically caved. So I think Universal is riding high in its power. It's riding high in the sort of moral leverage it has with its artists and with the fans of the artists who understand that artists get paid, that things like social platforms like AI are all threats to these big artists, and they're going to use that leverage for everything that it's worth.

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NILAY: TikTok at the same time is beginning to squeeze its users, right? It's, it's not up and coming. It's not burning a bunch of money to acquire users anymore. It's saying, we got to make a bunch of money from all the users we have. So you see, TikTok is pushing sponsored content all over the place. You see that TikTok Shop has just appeared in the cultural consciousness because Tick Tock is constantly showing you tick Tock Shop live streams, and they put it at the top of the menu bar. And so there's a real turn for that platform here, where the ascendancy of a social platform, when it's new and interesting and free and organic, is beginning to taper into what you might call the top when it is beginning to become ruthlessly monetized. And I think it's an appropriate reaction for the labels to say, ‘Okay, you're starting to ruthlessly monetize this platform. We deserve a big cut of that because we allowed you to build on the cheap.’  
  
 SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Nilay Patel. He runs The Verge dot com. And if you wanna hear from him more often, his podcast is called *Decoder*.

When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, it sure feels like every social media platform eventually just … gets … worse. There’s a term for that. We’re gonna speak to the guy who coined it.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> Ke$ha - TiK ToK: wake up in the morning like*

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Rameswaram. Nilay is gone, but we got Cory Doctorow in his stead. Cory’s an author, an activist, an extremely online dude, but he does not use …  
  
 *<CLIP> Ke$ha - TiK ToK: TikTok!*

CORY DOCTOROW (WRITER, ACTIVISTS): I use TikTok like a Gen Xer. I look at clips that have been uploaded to Twitter.

SEAN: But he *gets it*.

CORY: Oh, I get it. No, no, no, I get it. It has a spookily good recommendation engine. And, you know, there is part of the source of all of its mischief because, you know, they spy on you a lot. They acquire third party data sets. They use that data to make predictions about what you're going to want to see, and they show it to you. And it's generally pretty good. But they also abuse that power, right? Because most of TikTok's users are using it as a kind of surprise medium, right? And so that means that you're trusting TikTok not to game the system, right? Not to use the fact that you've said, oh, anything you want to cram into my eyeballs, I'll take a look at, so, you know, please don't, like, sell people the right to cram things into my eyeballs that I'm not interested in seeing or abuse that so that you can trick people into thinking that they're more popular in the platform than they really are, so that they put a lot of energy into making content for it. And that's where it all goes wrong. Because so long as it's good enough, we will just keep allowing them to do that nonconsensual cram-down of stuff we don't want to hear or see, provided that there's enough of a residue of things that seem good.

SEAN: And this is why we reached out to Cory. Because Cory coined the term for what’s going on at TikTok right now.

CORY: Well, I think that it's, it's something that, you know, I've called enshittification. Colloquially, I think a lot of people just use it to mean things are getting worse. But for me, it's a very technical phrase or a technical word that describes a specific process by which digital platforms use the particular contours of how digital services work to first lure in end users by giving them a good deal and then making that deal worse for them, but better for business customers who pay to access those end users. And then once everyone is locked in, take away all the surplus from both end users and business customers, give it all to the shareholders, and leave everyone in an increasingly worse service that just gets shittier and shittier until it turns into a pile of shit.

SEAN: Okay, so I want to ask you about TikTok in a moment in greater detail. But before we do that, can you give us the greatest enshitification story?

CORY: Yeah, Facebook's a poster child, right? This is a company that, you know, began its life as a service to a non-consensual rate, the fuckability of Harvard undergraduates, and only got worse after that.

SEAN: <laughs>

*<CLIP> The Social Network:  
JESSE/MARK: Billy Olson sitting here and had the idea of putting some of the pictures next to pictures of farm animals and have people vote on who's hotter.*

*OTHER GUY: …next to a pig.   
JESSE/MARK: Good call, Mr. Olson.*

CORY: But in in 2006, Zuckerberg said, okay, well, we're going to open up beyond college campuses. And, and the pitch that they made to people was, hey, I know that, like you're all on Myspace. And that's where your friends are. But did you know that Myspace was run by a, you know crapulent senescent evil Australian billionaire named Rupert Murdoch who spies on you with every hour that God sends. If you come over to Facebook, we'll never spy on you. Facebook is the non-spying-on-you version of Myspace.

SEAN: Wow, I forgot about that.

CORY: Yeah, yeah. They made a promise. And in fact at one point they let the users vote on whether or not Facebook should start spying on them and they voted against it and Facebook did it anyway!  
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
CORY: And they said to those users, ‘Hey, if you just tell us who matters to you on Facebook, we're just going to show you what they post in reverse chronological order.’ And then once those users were all locked in, they started to make things worse for them. They went to publishers and they said, 'Hey, do you remember when we told these rubes we. Would only show them the things that they asked to see?' That was a lie. If you want to just post excerpts of the content from your website along with a link, we'll just show it to them even though they never asked to see it. It's a free traffic funnel. Some of those users will subscribe to you and they'll see everything you post. Others will get algorithmically boosted content. And they went to the advertisers and they said, ‘Hey, 'remember we told these these rubes that we weren't going to spy on them?' Also a lie. ‘We're spying on them from asshole to appetite.’  
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
CORY: ‘We will target ads to them in the most fine grained hideous way imaginable. We're not going to charge you very much for this. We have a building full of engineers that are going to fight ad fraud.’ And then they just use the characteristics of digital to make that subtly worse. Over time they dial down the quantity of stuff that was in your feed that you'd asked to see bit by bit, drip by drip. If you, stop going to Facebook as often, they increase the amount of stuff you'd ask to see. But but so long as the that amount was going down. There was more space they could fill with things people would pay to make. You see whether that was advertisers or publishers. And then, you know, Facebook and Google had this illegal, collusive arrangement they called Jedi Blue, where they rigged the market. So they charged advertisers more and paid publishers less. So they made things worse for everyone. And that's where Facebook is now, right? It's this company that has left just this kind of fine residue of things that are useful in the service, and it's trying to surf this wave. Where they're right at the crest of there being no value at all in the service, or just enough value that you don't leave, because if they leave any more value than that on the table, then that's value that their shareholders could be getting. And they don't want to give you that value. They want to take it for themselves. And it's a razor thin edge that they're walking on. And it takes, you know, one, Cambridge Analytica scandal or whistleblower or, or a live stream mass shooting and people bolt for the exits. And, you know, when that happens on tech platforms, the platforms panic and what tech bros call panicking, is pivoting. And so, you know, in Facebook, you get this pivot that is like, 'All right, stop arguing with your racist Uncle in this text chat. From now on, the future is allowing Facebook to convert you into a legless, sexless, low polygon, heavily surveilled cartoon character in a virtual world called the metaverse that we stole from a 25-year-old cyberpunk novel.

SEAN: <laughs>

*<CLIP> Guardian News, facebook gives a glimpse of metaverse*

*Mark Zuckerberg: Imagine you put on your glasses or headset and you're instantly in your home space. It has parts of your physical home recreated virtually it has things that are only possible virtually and it has an incredibly inspiring view of whatever you find most beautiful*

SEAN: I think you importantly point out, though, Cory, that even once a platform or a service is en-shit-ified, people stick around. I stick around on Instagram even though it upsets me. I'm still on Twitter even though Elon, what have you. What receipts do you have to show that TikTok is currently being enshittified? Because certainly a lot of people are still there.

CORY: Well, I think that, that there's lots of different bits and pieces. You know, you can look at things like the, the, scandal over the heating tool where it was revealed by a Forbes reporter that in addition to having algorithmic allocation of attention, that the platform was also, picking performers.

*<CLIP> Forbes, TikTok’s Secret ‘Heating’ Button Exposed*

*Emily Baker-White: one of the ways that TikTok has tried to convince these potential partners that they should be on TikTok is to show them their content can do really well there and sometimes that means heating their content to prove see if you come to tick tock life will be good for you here*

CORY: And then when people didn't get the eyeballs that the people who'd been heating tooled. Were getting, they said, 'oh, you just must be bad at TikTok. Try harder.'  
  
SEAN: Mm.

CORY: So, you know, you got that on the performer side. And then on the user and performer side you've got the the willingness of TikTok to walk away from its license with universal. Now I'm not going to cape for Universal. I mean this is a company that is a big evil monopolist. But I think that the calculus that TikTok is making is that they would rather inflict pain on their customers than on their shareholders.

SEAN: Mmm.

CORY: And so whatever it is that Universal was asking, their customers could live with that pain, with having the videos that they worked on for hours or days or weeks and put maybe thousands of dollars into suddenly rendered silent because TikTok decided not to step up for their interests.  
  
SEAN: But TikTok wants people to stick around. Why does TikTok make the experience worse when they want people to stick around?

CORY: Well, they don't have to care. They're the phone company, right? What? Google figured out that spending $25 million dollars a year on being the default search engine for every single service platform, portal, site and device was cheaper than competing with people who might make a better search engine than them, and so they spent $25 billion a year. They lit a whole-ass Twitter on fire every, you know, 22 months. To make sure that you never tried another search engine. And so they don't have to care. If the only search engine you ever try is Google, then Google doesn't have to be as good.

SEAN: And do you believe that there is a way to restore the good in a platform that has become enshittified? Do you think stronger market protections, stronger regulation, stronger employee rights at a tech company, whatever it might be, could actually restore something that has already completely fallen off.

CORY: I don't think we need to make these platforms better. I just think we need to make it so that when they collapse, they don't take us down with them.

SCORING IN <Huge As Horns (No Horns Version)>

CORY: So, you know, we have companies like Google that have made one successful in-house product. A 25 year old search engine, and then, almost without exception, everything else they made in-house was a failure. And everything that they've got that's a success, Their mobile platform, ad tech, server management, collaboration, Docs, maps, satellites -- whatever. Those are all companies they bought from someone else. They're not Willy Wonka's idea factory. They're rich uncle Pennybags, operationalizing other people's good ideas. And so, you know, those companies would have just collapsed under their own weight back when we enforced antitrust law and rules against vertical and horizontal mergers. We've allowed these companies that would have normally either not gotten off the ground or would have collapsed under their own weight. We've allowed them to grow and take over. And so now they're on fire, right? Because we stopped the good fire. The controlled burns. And now we have the wildfire of these companies not being able to do the job that we need them to do. So everything is on fire all the time. And what we should be doing is not figuring out how to make it safe to live at that place that keeps catching fire. We want to evacuate the fire zone. We have to make it easy for people to leave the platforms, not try and make the platforms better. Screw the platforms. Let them die, right? What we need is for people to leave the platforms with their data, their relationships, and the value they get from them intact.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Cory Doctorow. He’s pretty hardcore. People call him Hard Cory. He’s with the Electronic Frontier Foundation. They fight for digital human rights. And he’s got a book coming out! It’s a Silicon Valley finance thriller about a forensic accountant who runs down high tech scams. It’s called *The Bezzle*. Find it wherever you read. Hady “Big Dog” Mawajdeh produced our program today with an assist from Amanda “Big Dog” Lewellyn. Matthew Collette edited. Laura Bullard fact checked. Rob Byers mixed it. But wait. There’s more of us here: Haleema Shah, Avishay Artsy, Patrick Boyd, Miles Bryan, Victoria Chamberlin, Jesse Alejandro Cottrell, supervising producer Amina Al-Sadi, executive producer Miranda Kennedy, co-host with the most, Noel King. We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder. *Today, Explained* is distributed by WNYC. This show is a part of Vox, which is totally free thanks in part to contributions from our listeners. Join us at vox.com/give. >> Thanks!

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]