Music streaming service Spotify recently removed the music of R. Kelly and XXXTentacion from its playlists as part of its new policy on hateful content and conduct. Subsequently, Apple Music has also ceased promotion of R.
Kelly in featured playlists. While the music of both black American musicians remains searchable on their sites, it is arguable that the decisions amount to censorship.

In the case of Kelly, a multiple award-winning R&B artist with a decades-long career, a campaign under the hash-tag #MuteRKelly has waged for months. On the basis of both long-standing and recent allegations of sexual misconduct, the Time’s Up movement more recently also began calling for a boycott of his music. Kelly was acquitted of child pornography charges in 2008, and has not faced any further charges.

The rapper XXXTentacion was charged with robbery and assault in 2015, and has served time in jail. More recently, he has faced charges of false imprisonment, witness tampering, and aggravated battery of a pregnant woman.

Both artists deny the recent allegations. R. Kelly’s management issued a statement highlighting the musician’s history of writing lyrics that express “love and passion for women”, claiming the allegations are a “smear campaign”. XXXTentacion’s representative released a statement listing numerous musicians accused of sexual misconduct, asking if similar action will be taken against them.

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Some, such as ABC broadcaster Zan Rowe, have argued that you can’t separate the art from the artist.

However, I am inclined to see Spotify’s move as a dangerous trend toward censorship. Countless events of history show that censorship - removing the right to a voice - represents a challenge to central precepts of democracy. As US rapper Jay Z has written, “we change people through conversation, not through censorship”.

The removal of R. Kelly and XXXTentacion’s music comes as part of Spotify’s new Hate Content and Hateful Conduct policy, released on May 10. The policy, working with rights advocacy groups, aims to identify hate content and remove it and also deals with “hateful conduct”. While Spotify says it doesn’t “believe in censoring content because of an artist’s or creator’s behavior”, the policy allows for the streaming service to remove support for an artist if they do something “especially harmful or hateful (for example, violence against children and sexual violence)”. 
Spotify has stated that community advice will inform how it enforces its hate policy. At the same time, the policy notes that “cultural standards and sensitivities vary”, and that what is “acceptable in some circumstances [...] is offensive in others”. It remains to be seen if the force of public opinion alters what we tolerate in music, and from musicians.

In the current situation, the decision to remove the music of R. Kelly and XXXTentation from playlists rests solely on allegations of their behaviour, without reference to either their music or lyrics. Arguably, it is an example of what some now term the “Weinstein effect”.

A bigger consequence of Spotify’s new policy may be its ramifications for other male hip-hop artists, whose lyrics have often been interpreted as sexually objectifying women. Researchers have identified a range of misogynistic themes in hip-hop, from legitimisation of rape and violence, to celebration of prostitution and pimping. Jay Z has, for example, referenced domestic violence in his lyrics, while Eminem has used hateful language directed at the gay community. How might Spotify deal with complaints about content from artists such as these?

Censorship of music and musicians due to the artist’s behaviour and politics is nothing new. Due to his denigration of the Jewish race, 19th century German composer Richard Wagner’s music has drawn immense opprobrium; its performance in Israel remains a taboo. Even so, the anti-Semitism of other composers (such as Frédéric Chopin, or many of the Russian school) has not caused censure.

In Soviet Russia, the music of Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev was banned from performance for a period. Under the policy of “socialist realism”, music that failed to reflect the supposed benefits of the new system was blacklisted. In fact, the power that certain music and musicians exert in society can disturb many.

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Some have claimed recently that there is a history of protection for those in the music industry whose lives have been entangled in allegations of sexual misconduct. A question remains how we can reconcile the issue of these artists continuing to make money with allegations of sexual misconduct.
However censorship is not the answer. We can, and must, continue to critique the conduct of musicians, but should separate the art from the artist.