

# Sony tries to save face with 'Interview' flip-flop

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Brandon Delaney, general manager of the Plaza Theatre, in Atlanta, Ga., finishes hanging the marquis Tuesday, Dec. 23, 2014 to announce that the theatre will be showing "The Interview." "The Interview" was put back into theaters Tuesday when Sony Pictures Entertainment announced a limited Christmas Day theatrical release for the comedy that provoked an international incident with North Korea and outrage over its cancelled release. (AP Photo/Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Ben Gray)

Sony's flip-flop on releasing "The Interview" shows the studio is working

furiously to try to chart the right course through political and public-opinion minefields.

Although analysts don't believe the decision will have any effect on Sony's image, it will at least give the movie-going public a chance to vote with their wallets and send North Korea a protest message.

Last week, Sony canceled the Christmas Day release of "The Interview" in the wake of an extensive hacking attack and release of confidential emails by a group linked with North Korea. The movie stars Seth Rogen and James Franco as journalists tasked by the CIA with killing North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The hackers threatened violence if Sony didn't pull the movie. Sony did so after major theater chains decided not to screen it.

But the company then wavered in the face of public outcry and criticism from President Barack Obama. On Tuesday, Sony Entertainment CEO Michael Lynton said Seth Rogen's North Korea farce "will be in a number of theaters on Christmas Day."

The film is set to open in over 200 theaters, down from an original release planned in 3,000. Atlanta's Plaza Theater and 16 theaters that are part of the Alamo Drafthouse chain in Texas are among those that plan to show it.

Lynton said Sony also is continuing its efforts to release the movie in more theaters and through more platforms—namely digital channels, such as Internet streaming or video on demand on cable systems. But Sony isn't offering specifics. Starz, which has first pay TV and streaming rights to Sony releases, didn't respond to requests for comment. Streaming service Netflix declined comment, while YouTube didn't respond to requests.

Plaza Theater owner Michael Furlinger said he was thrilled to be showing the movie. He canceled plans to fly to Long Island, New York, to see his parents for the holidays.

"We play a lot of controversial pictures, things I don't necessarily agree with, but I will never censor them," he said. "It's not for me to decide. It's for the customer to decide. If they want to come, they'll spend their money. If they don't, that's their choice. It should not be the choice of somebody from North Korea or China or anywhere else."



A large poster advertising the movie *The Interview* hangs on the back wall of the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema Tuesday, Dec. 23, 2014, in Houston. Sony Pictures Entertainment announced Tuesday a limited theatrical release of "The Interview" beginning Thursday, putting back into the theaters the comedy that prompted an international incident with North Korea and outrage over its cancelled release. (AP Photo/Pat Sullivan)

Atlanta Police spokesman Sgt. Greg Lyon said police will monitor the location for potential threats, but he wouldn't discuss specifics. Furlinger said the theater will take some precautions, though he said he wasn't worried about the threats.

If anything, the controversy has raised awareness about the movie. Although fewer theaters are showing it, those theaters might be more packed than they would have been otherwise.

Anthony LoRusso, 54, of Atlanta, thought the premise of the movie was "silly" and initially planned to wait for the DVD. Now, he plans to see it at The Plaza.

Colby Cohen, 29, of Atlanta said he probably would have seen it anyway, but the brief cancellation made him want to see it more.

"I'm going to get to fight terrorism on Christmas Day now," he said.

Because Sony has been wavering on its release of "The Interview" since last week, deciding to release it after all should not have a major effect on its image. Laura Ries, president of Atlanta-based branding consulting company Ries & Ries, said most moviegoers don't tie [movies](#) with the studio that makes them in the first place.

If Sony ends up expanding the theatrical release and sells the movie through digital channels, it could end up recouping some of its box offices losses. Doug Stone, president of film industry newsletter Box Office Analyst, had estimated domestic box office for the movie would be \$75 million to \$100 million, of which Sony keeps about 55 percent. But the release is too limited so far to give Sony much of a financial bump.

Furthermore, costly damage from the email leaks to relationships and

future projects cannot be recouped, and there is a threat of more leaks as Sony plans on releasing the film now.

"Panic-based decisions are not sound crisis management," said Jonathan Bernstein, president of Los Angeles-based crisis management company Bernstein Crisis Management. The studio is making decisions too quickly and could face more embarrassment if hackers leak additional documents and emails in retaliation for showing the movie, he said. He said Sony should have waited until it is sure it can protect itself.

Still, moviegoers seemed enthusiastic Tuesday. Isaac Sokol, a 21-year-old university student in the Dallas suburb of Richardson, bought two tickets for a Christmas night show at the Alamo Drafthouse theater in Richardson.

"The only way to tackle world conflicts and human rights violations and all of the dreaded things around the world is to take them with a grain of salt," he said. "If you don't, it's going to just be sadness."

The Alamo Drafthouse said many showtimes across the chain were selling out for Christmas Day, but the company did not provide specifics.

Once James Wallace, the Richardson theater's creative manager, received word Tuesday morning that the movie was back on, the theater got to work preparing for several shows. Among other touches, the theater will offer a patriotic menu featuring burgers, "freedom fries" and apple pie.

"You better believe it's going to be all-American," Wallace said.

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