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Cancel Culture and Journalism Education

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Abstract: Many agree that “cancel culture” involves the use of media, especially social media, to publicly criticize someone causing harm or damage to a person or group. Yet the term is used in very different ways on behalf of very different and complex agendas. This stream will define cancel culture and examine how journalists are implicated in it, especially given claims that elite media (“woke media”) are responsible for cancelling people, and related free speech implications. Finally, it will address how journalism educators can prepare students to avoid both the excesses of cancel culture and vehement accusations that they have shielded wrong-doers; and how journalism students can learn best practices regarding how to explain to various audiences their decision-making practices.

Introduction

What do these figures have in common? Congresswoman Liz Cheney, Mr. Potato Head, Dr. Seuss, Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, and rapper Kanye West. Let’s keep going. Conservative representative Marjorie Taylor Green, actress Roseanne Barr, the Muppets, comedian Louis CK, influencer Chrissy Teigen, and the book *Gone with the Wind*. It is a diverse list that could definitely be longer, too. You have probably already guessed the answer. Over the course of the last few years, all of these figures have been canceled. We can see from this brief list that cancel culture spans the realms of entertainment, publishing, popular culture, and of course, politics. It is a decidedly widespread phenomenon. Yet, the origins, extent, and even definition of cancel culture are not well known or understood.

Background and definitions

Cancel culture is a term that gets tossed around frequently, but few agree on the exact definition. In fact, the term itself is quite loaded. Some who support its aims prefer the term “accountability culture” to emphasize what they see as the potential important outcomes of cancellation. By contrast, those critical of its role in society use the words “cancel culture” to assert its problematic nature. As professor of linguistics Nicole Holliday notes, “cancel culture” has been subject to “semantic bleaching,” which means that the words have been evacuated of their meaning (qtd. in Kurtzleben 2021).

At its core, cancel culture is related to accountability. Holliday defines it as a “cultural boycott” (qtd. in Kurtzleben, 2021). Cancel culture, at least historically, has been wielded by folks that have not had access to traditional forms of political power. Pinning down the exact history is as challenging as defining its meaning, but generally, it seems that the term originated in Nile Rodger’s 1981 single “Your Love is Cancelled” (Romano, 2021). The idea of canceling a person for misdeeds emerged in a 1991 film entitled *New Jack City*. It reemerged among Black Twitter users in the 2010s (Romano, 2021). Despite the fact that the term is usually used in relation to social media, and social media is where most cancellations take place, it does share similarities with civil rights boycotts and other black empowerment movements from the 1950s and 1960s (Romano, 2021). Linguistics scholar Anne Charity Hudley describes the similarities like this:

When you see people canceling Kanye, canceling other people, it’s a collective way of saying, ‘We elevated your social status, your economic prowess, [and] we’re not going to pay attention to you in the way that we once did. ... ‘I may have no power, but the power I have is to [ignore] you.’ (qtd. in Romano, 2021)

In short, the contemporary usage of cancel culture is driven by the attention economy and is based in social media’s power to shape how we navigate blame and accountability.

Part of the challenge in defining cancel culture is that it is often conflated with all forms of public shaming and calling out in the media. *Vox* journalist Aja Romano (2021) insists, however, that what sets cancel culture apart is its focus on accountability. Ligaya Mishan (2020) notes in the *New York Times*, however, that there are some that see cancel culture as a continuation of old trends, not the beginning of a new one:

Cancel culture doesn’t exist because it has *always* existed, in rumors, whispers and smear campaigns, and censorship and retribution are far worse when sponsored or tacitly sanctioned by the state, as with the imprisonment and kangaroo-court convictions of those exercising free speech under totalitarianism, or the blacklisting and barring from employment of suspected Communists in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, a collaborative effort between the House Un-American Activities Committee and an eager-to-please private sector.

An important point that the above quote raises is the relationship between cancel culture and repressive time periods when free speech was not protected. Promoting accountability while protecting free speech is a central tension in today’s democratic life. Cancel culture lays at the center of this tension.

Likewise, social ostracism of a variety of forms shares resonances with contemporary usages of cancel culture. But, as Mishan (2020) notes, one thing that sets cancel culture apart is that it is typically done without the sanction of state power. In other words, cancellations come from ordinary people, usually in group, gathering together on social media to wield influence. It is not always clear, however, whether cancellers intend to redress a specific wrong or correct an imbalance of power or whether, to use Mishan's (2020) words, the "blood-sport thrill of humiliating a stranger" is the driving force of public participation. Cancel culture is also sometimes used interchangeably with what we might also call "de-platforming," or revoking an individual's privilege to use a technology, most likely a social media platform, which comes with access to an audience of followers.

Driving questions

How does cancel culture relate to partisan politics?

One cannot speak about cancel culture without recognizing its partisan leanings. I did a great deal of research on cancel culture as a rhetorical strategy earlier this year, and while not universal, undeniably most political figures claiming to have been canceled are conservative voices. Members of the political right most vociferously claim to have been canceled. Yet, keep in mind that public figures have been canceled for promoting leftist causes as well. Former 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick is an example.

Data exists about the partisan resonances of cancel culture. The Pew Research Center (Vogel et al., 2021) conducted a massive survey of over 10,000 adults and asked both closed and open-ended questions about their thoughts on the topic. The most striking results of the survey was in fact the partisan divide on what the term means and how it operates in our society. Those respondents who identified as conservative republicans were more likely to define cancel culture as censorship, whereas liberals saw it more as accountability. Likewise, when asked whether calling people out on social media represents accountability or unjust punishment, conservatives were more likely to say it punishes those who do not deserve it while liberals again emphasized its role in holding others accountable for racist or sexist comments. Academic work on cancel culture has also noticed this deep divide between understanding it as accountability or seeing it as censorship and a threat to free speech (Norris, 2021).

Does cancel culture even exist?

Another central debate related to cancel culture is whether it even actually exists. To ask this question another way, what actually happens to people who get canceled? Do public figures who get canceled actually lose power and influence? In the interest of full disclosure, as a scholar of rhetoric, I am less interested in finding tools to answer this question. (Instead, in my research I asked about the persuasive impact of invoking cancel culture in discourse.)

To return to the question: what happens to public figures or ordinary people who have been canceled? The short answer is it usually depends on how much power they had going into their cancellation. Mishan (2020) notes in the *New York Times* that the phenomenon has not succeeded in bringing down any powerful public figures. J.K. Rowling, for instance, canceled for transphobic statements on gender identity, remains insulated with her wealth, and her books

continue to sell. Conservative figures like Senator Josh Hawley who have had book deals revoked for perpetuating false claims of election fraud often find new book deals and remain in Congress with a large public platform. It is tough, despite the Senator's own claims to the contrary, to see him as someone who has truly been canceled. Comedians and other entertainers often lay low for a while then begin touring again. "When the mighty do fall," Mishan (2020) writes, "it often takes years, coupled with behavior that's not just immoral but illegal." Figures like Bill Cosby or Harvey Weinstein come to mind, but whether they have been canceled or indicted for crimes is a fair question.

What does empirical research say about the existence cancel culture?

The existence of cancel culture has been studied empirically in academia. Yet, doing so presents challenges. Pippa Norris (2021) notes that it's difficult to count the talks canceled or academic appointments never made. That said, after mounting a worldwide survey of the discipline of political science, Norris concluded that in developed countries like the United States, the professoriate skews liberal (left leaning), and right leaning scholars are more likely to identify a worsening climate for academic freedom and political debate. In developing countries where traditional values are likely to be dominant, the opposite trend exists. In short, Norris identifies that there may indeed be pressure to conform among academics, representing a form of academic cancel culture.

Who gets cancelled, and what are the impacts?

We have already noted that powerful people who are canceled often do not lose much money or prestige.

Ordinary people who find themselves the target of public scorn often fare far worse. Social media democratizes public shame, allowing people without extraordinary fame or influence to "go viral." Journalist Jon Ronson's (2015) book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* explores this in some depth, investigating the personal impacts (lost jobs, mental health challenges, frayed relationships) that accompany a public shaming, even as he recognizes the powerful draw to engage in some type of collective catharsis when we see someone behaving badly online.

For those who see an unqualified good when calling out racism or sexism online, Gwen Bouvier's (2020) work may give pause. Her analysis of a racist call out in Canada that occurred on Twitter shows the limitations of the platform in leading a coherent and careful discussion. While her conclusions will be familiar to anyone who has spent time on Twitter, more importantly, she notes that these public shamings serve to individualize racism, severing it from its institutional and political contexts. Thus, these Twitter shamings mostly serve as a way for those calling out to virtue signal instead of spurring any meaningful conversation about how racist views come to be held.

How does cancel culture influence journalism?

Fundamentally, the attention to this term reminds us that all journalists operate in a hyper-partisan media climate. Likewise, it is not surprising that accusations of cancel culture surface in a media climate driven by clicks and significant de-investment in local journalism. Bold accusations splashed across homepages can generate clicks.

It is also worth noting that cancel culture can come for journalists. For people who put their opinions out in the public frequently, a backlash seems almost guaranteed. Another moment where we see these intertwining is the cancelation of journalists. Journalists, too, are subject to past transgressions resurfacing, as when the *New York Times* disciplined reporter Donald McNeil, Jr. for using the N-word. McNeil later resigned. Additionally, Alexi McCammond was on the precipice of becoming the editor-in-chief of *Teen Vogue* until offensive tweets sent by her teenage self were exposed (Sossi, 2021). Cancel culture can also come for the opinion pages. Here, we can think of former *New York Times* opinion page editor James Bennet. Bennet resigned after publishing an opinion editorial (not written by him) that caused public outcry. The opinion editorial advocated a military response to civic unrest. In notifying the public, publisher A.G. Sulzberger identified “a significant breakdown in our editing processes” (qtd. in Tracy, 2020). As one media strategist noted, big newspapers like the *Times* are struggling to respond to culture changing around them. To add fuel to the fire, they often lack clear and consistent policies for how to react to rampant public criticism (qtd. in Yee, 2021).

Regardless of your own opinions on these cases, they illustrate a need to pay attention both to one’s own individual profile and to institutional policy to appropriately balance critical response with free expression and the need for a vibrant democratic exchange of ideas.

Conclusion and implications for journalism education

A final editorial note, then, for those working with and educating journalists to-be. My own research shows that claiming to be canceled has wide purchase among particular audiences. Such claims are used rhetorically for persuasive effect to galvanize the public. I urge those encountering such pleas to take them with a grain of salt. I would also encourage them to analyze the situation and the remaining power of the speaker before accepting claims on face value. Likewise, all those teaching our future journalists must help them develop skills in being critical consumers of information, especially as the factual landscape diverges in the United States. Developing the sophisticated skills necessary to weigh the possibility of public outrage (stoked through platforms that reward hyperbole) with the ever-important obligation to spur public debate is more crucial now than ever.

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