

Journalism Education and Cancel Culture

WJEC 2022 Online Conference

Stream meeting summary by rapporteur Milica Pesic, Executive Director, Media Diversity Institute, UK; expert/background report by Jennifer Keohane, Assistant Professor, University of Baltimore, U.S. (see wjec.net/2022-online-conference/ at conference streams tab); panel chair Linda Steiner, Professor, University of Maryland, U.S.; and additional team members (below).

This stream reflected on the phenomenon of cancel culture from a wide range of perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of how cancel culture affects the media sector in various national and geopolitical contexts. The team members also used this unique opportunity for an exchange of observations and insights to come up with practical recommendations that can support the work of journalism educators and journalists in this highly complex media reality of our era.

It was highlighted that although cancel culture is a relatively new term, it resonates with previous historical periods — as long as humans have been living in societies, they have used words to confront or attack one another. In addition, it is crucial to make clear distinctions between cases of “character assassination” and “cancelling.”

Importantly, cancel culture is a relatively loaded term. The word often evokes two major and opposing frames: “accountability” and “censorship.” These binary frames are also closely associated with the political polarization we witness today in many corners of the world, both symptomizing and deepening partisan divides. The meaning of the term varies with the political context too. In authoritarian-leaning systems, for instance, “cancelling” is not so much a grassroots phenomenon, but rather a way for powerful political actors to strategically suppress voices of dissent.

Therefore, one of the stream’s key lessons is that it’s essential to scrutinize the varying meanings of the term cancel culture in and across different contexts in journalism education. In doing so, we can actually grow more attentive to words. The term “culture,” for example, operates very broadly, creating specific ideological narratives and setting boundaries — what should and shouldn’t be said. Students must realize that this can lead to censorship and self-censorship.

By scrutinizing the complex dynamics of the cancel culture discourse, we will also be taking steps to create safe classroom environments that model the critical thinking skills students will need as journalists. Instead of adopting cancel culture as a catch-all phrase, we can ask (1) who or what has been cancelled; (2) for what reasons; (3) by whom; (4) in which circumstances; (5) and with what consequences in particular cases. Such focused analysis can also make it possible for us to address the underlying mechanisms of cancel culture. For instance, powerful people who are cancelled often do not lose much money or prestige. We should also consider how and to what extent cancelling can backfire. Some speakers, for example, are not particularly well-known before they are cancelled.

In a similar fashion, it is important to encourage students and journalists to critically and ethically address cancel culture’s impact on society, including public interests such as the right to privacy, accountability, access to facts, and freedom of expression. The media cannot afford to reduce their function to promote ideological polarization.

It could also be beneficial to shift our major point of reference from the notion of “freedom” to the notion of “participation” and “participatory citizenship”: instead of asking what makes us free, asking what makes us participatory.

Reflection and critical thinking should also involve honest discussions about the state of contemporary media. Even big media outlets seem to struggle to adjust to the rapidly changing culture around them. Moreover, media organizations often lack clear policies on how to react to rampant public criticism. There are also usually no clear relative laws dictated by the state. Trust in the mainstream media is declining as well, facilitated by the rapid rise and spread of disinformation. Meanwhile, journalists are under tremendous pressure since the news cycle is faster than ever. And we should remember that the independence of newsrooms is often severely undermined not only because of political reasons, but also due to various economic factors and pressures.

Recommendations

1. Take into account the complexity of cancel culture in your assessments and analyses.
2. Scrutinize the concept of cancel culture in and across contexts.
3. Contemplate notions of public interest, free speech, privacy, accountability, and factuality.
4. Consider using “participation” and “participatory citizenship” as a major framework.
5. Address the state of the media honestly and in an analytical fashion.

Conclusion

The environment we are living in is complex and extremely challenging both for journalists and media users. It is therefore crucial for those who teach journalism to approach and address the concept and phenomenon of cancel culture in all its complexity. Reflection, thorough analysis, and critical thinking are empowering, especially in times when our societies are in a state of flux.

Additional team members included: Eric Heinze, University of London, UK; Georgios Terzis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium; Edmundo Bracho, University of Westminster, UK; Zahera Harb, City University of London, UK; Anna Szilagyi, Saint Louis University, Spain; Lejla Turcilo, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Zrinjka Perusko, University of Zagreb, Croatia; Marina Tuneva and Zaneta Trajkoska, both of the Institute of Communication Studies, North Macedonia; Valbona Sulce, Albanian Media Institute, Albania; and Robyn S. Goodman, Alfred University, U.S.