



CANCEL CULTURE: THE PHENOMENON, ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND OPEN LETTERS

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This past year, opinions have steadily accumulated around an increasingly polarizing term: “cancel culture”. Nowadays, whenever a celebrity is involved in a controversy—often related to sexual misconduct or the poor treatment of minorities—, the word “cancelling” inevitably appears on social media. The practice of cancelling emerged on sites such as Tumblr with anonymous users shaming powerful wrongdoers in the hopes of inspiring legal action. Preceding the phenomenon of cancelling, Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) had been dealing with similar virtual wars in many online communities. The Gamergate movement popularized the concept of SJW in 2015. It focused on female gamers and developers—most notably Zoë Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian—who called out the pervasive sexism in the online gaming community. Despite the well-known derogatory connotation of the term, which the Oxford dictionary does not forget to point out, an SJW is defined as a “person who expresses or promotes socially progressive views”.¹

The term has been appropriated—though not widely, and with a certain level of irony—by some who include the SJW category in their social media profiles. Nonetheless, the negative connotations attached to the term by the Gamergate movement and other similar groups are very prevalent. Hence, Social Justice Warrior is still frequently used as an insult. In-group members often see SJWs as “unwelcome outsiders” who try to impose their liberal ideology on others and represent “[a threat] to the health of the entire body” (Ohlheiser 2015). According to the most voted definition on Urban Dictionary, shared in 2019, SJWs “claim to be fighting for social justice

¹ “Social Justice Warrior.” 2020. *Oxford Dictionary*. [lexico.com/en/definition/social_justice_warrior](https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/social_justice_warrior).



but are actually validating their own ego, looking for special treatment, or attention”.² Even though the concept has seen a notable decline in use in favor of the idea of cancel culture, these negative undertones that once affected the concept of Social Justice Warrior still prevail.

The most popular and recently shared definition on Urban Dictionary for cancel culture purports that those who engage in online cancelling practices are “narcissists” and “immature individuals”.³ The very online nature of the phenomenon exacerbates these perceived negative aspects. In the current online context, cancel culture “illustrates a common trajectory for social media phenomena that can obscure the broader range of digital engagement practices” (Ng 2020, 622). For instance, as the Urban Dictionary definition for SJW suggests, those with progressive views who are active on social media are often assumed not to take the fight to the streets. Such an assumption has been consistently maintained throughout all sorts of mainstream media outlets that cover stories involving cancel culture.

Contrary to widespread optimism less than a decade earlier, current media discourse highlights the negative aspects of online interactions and activism. Researchers in the first years of the 21st century often harbored very positive outlooks on the potential of the Internet. In their eyes, it could help businesses and even foster social movements, activism and equality. A good example of this view can be found in *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012) by Manuel Castells, current Minister for Universities in Spain, in which he highlights the possibilities that the Internet offers for grassroots activism, citing promising cases such as the Arab Spring. This is not to say that the perception of Internet communities is purely negative these days. Yet, some of the criticism over activism on social media platforms is unavoidable by the very nature of these sites: they can only offer short and direct messages that often fail to provide context. These limitations are intrinsic to any online discourse and are thus key in any conversation about cancel culture.

The predominant media narrative regarding this phenomenon is constructed around the above-mentioned frame and further reinforced via selectivity. Selective exposure, which also occurs with traditional media, strengthens the preexisting biases that the audience has. Selectivity becomes much more acute in online environ-

² “Social Justice Warrior.” *Urban Dictionary*. 2019. urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Social%20Justice%20Warrior

³ “Cancel Culture.” *Urban Dictionary*. 2020. urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cancel%20Culture



ments such as Twitter, Facebook or Tumblr. On these platforms, people tend to exclusively follow those who share their opinions and interests while blocking individuals they do not agree with, building up very effective echo chambers for themselves. The wrongs perceived by SJWs and those engaging in cancel culture are amplified within the community and sometimes tend to appear to in-group members as worse than they are. This phenomenon, however, also works the other way around. It implies that those outside the echo chambers concerned with a specific matter are either ignorant of its existence—or, at least, far less informed about it—and think it unimportant. As a result, disagreements are dramatically carried out since every topic appears to be a black-and-white issue.

Mass media often fabricate Manichean narratives that influence public opinion by creating myths that reinforce the “perceived lack of justice for the accused” (Holman 2020, 11). A clear example of this can be seen in reports of sexual assaults accusations involving college athletes and sportsmen in general.⁴ Such reports and articles focus on how the careers of accused men will be affected, including the impact of suspensions on sports seasons, instead of the crime itself and the harm done to the victim. This kind of reporting is less common today given the increased public awareness regarding victim-blaming narratives. But, even with the recent decline of such obviously damaging perspectives these days, the underlying evocation of the accused as being made to suffer unjustly—purely driven by vengeance or hate—remains present in the form of subtler criticism made to the phenomenon of cancel culture.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES, FANDOM AND IDENTITY

The Me Too movement is a good example of how in certain cases cancel culture has proven to be “an effective tool for achieving social justice by victims unable to obtain legal redress or public apology” (Norris 2020, 2). For instance, the allegations against

⁴ See, for example: Holley, Joe and Christian Sweezy. 2006. “Rape Accusation Against Lacrosse Players Roils Duke.” *Washington Post*. Published March 30, 2006. www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/29/AR2006032902644.html?itid=ik_inline_manual_20; and ABC News. 2010. “Cracking down; Suspended.” Retrieved from archive.org/details/WJLA_20100421_223000_ABC_World_News_With_Diane_Sawyer#start/420/end/480



famous men such as Harvey Weinstein, Mario Batali and Louis C.K.⁵ called for action against those who, despite their harmful behavior, were not only still making good money but also continued to be loved by their industries and greatly admired by their fans. Furthermore, the power that media wield in high-profile cases cannot be overlooked here, since the public perception of those under fire is often mediated by their portrayal on mass media. In this context, results may vary from media framing the allegations as trustworthy—which, in turn, might provoke backlash and legal consequence, or simply temporary silencing and a later comeback of the celebrity in question—to presenting the allegations as unimportant in the light of their work.⁶ Finally, accusations of misconduct are sometimes rejected as either false or irrelevant, a discourse often dominated and maintained by fans of the accused. This response is key here, as it has greatly affected the overall perception of cancel culture. It frames the discussion in terms of how cancelling targets the person in an unjust act of vendetta rather than denouncing the behavior. Due to emotional (and sometimes intellectual) attachments, it becomes difficult to support the discourse of cancel culture when it targets an individual whose career and work audiences love and admire.

Part of the issue with online activism—besides the limited context that can be provided in such short and direct messages—is this emotional aspect that can be found behind calls for action within a specific community. The cancelling in itself is centered around the idea of public shaming, and has been defined as an attempt “to ostracize someone for violating social norms” (Norris 2020, 2). The punitive nature of the rationale can be perceived as unjust in the context of the legal systems commonly understood as fair—in terms of presumption of innocence. In the case of famous people, aided by media narratives, the sense of injustice is aggravated by fans' emo-

⁵ It should be noted that these allegations vary in severity. While Harvey Weinstein has been accused by more than a dozen women of assaulting, sexually harassing and/or raping them, Louis C.K. allegations were limited to sexual harassment and misconduct.

⁶ This was the case with the representation of Plácido Domingo's accusations in Spanish media, which had a clear effect on public opinion and reactions toward the opera singer. While in the US various concerts had been cancelled since mid-August 2019, it was not until late February 2020 that Domingo's concerts started to be cancelled in Spain. See: Roberts, Maddy Shaw. 2019. “Plácido Domingo concerts cancelled in response to sexual harassment allegations.” *Classicfm*. Published August 14, 2019. www.classicfm.com/artists/placido-domingo/concerts-cancelled-sexual-harassment-investigation/; and Euronews en español. 2020. “Primera cancelación en España de conciertos de Plácido Domingo.” *Euronews*. Published February 27, 2020. es.euronews.com/2020/02/26/primera-cancelacion-en-espana-de-conciertos-de-placido-domingo



tional response to seeing someone they love and admire being attacked. The parasocial relationships that are formed between celebrities and audiences are becoming stronger thanks to social media. These platforms allow famous people to share videos with some semblance of intimacy, so it feels as if they were speaking directly to viewers and making their “true” private selves accessible. Additionally, online communities are central to fanbase creation and maintenance. Not only are fans’ preferences strengthened by in-group dynamics, but the celebrity or artist they adore also becomes even more important by virtue of mediating social relationships, friendships and identity formation, as participants in increasingly tight, interactive online communities become closer to each other.

Moving forward, a key issue to consider is how fans assess and react to the severity of the accused’s actions or opinions. We have seen that fandoms have the potential to steer creators’ decisions and to sabotage a program they dislike. The voices of certain avid fans within their echo chambers are easily amplified and have the ability to call some sections of the fandom into action. The impulse to protect what is loved is not intrinsically wrong and can be a driving force of progressive change, most notably in terms of representation. It has often been the case that fans, feeling as attached as they do to a given novel, movie or TV series, feel offended on behalf of said product when the authors taint it with their behavior and/or decisions. Ng provides an early example of such outrage in *The 100* fandom. Though prior to the current pervasiveness of cancel culture, some fans vocally opposed the death of Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carey), a popular lesbian character in the show, and called for others to stop supporting the show (Ng 2020, 623). Occasionally, the attempted boycotts are not motivated by progressive views, but quite the opposite, as was the case with fans’ backlash to a female protagonist in the last Star Wars trilogy.⁷

Stemming from this kind of incident, critics of cancel culture have pointed out that the phenomenon takes things too far by inciting behavior that feels too much like censorship. This happens when the behavior of the criticized individual affects, by proxy, the cultural product that the fandom has formed around and identifies with.

⁷ See, for instance: French, David. 2015. “Star Wars Proves Feminists Are Clueless about Science Fiction”. *National Review*. Published December 21, 2015. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/428858/stars-warss-clueless-feminist-fans>; and Brown, David G. 2015. “Why Star Wars: The Force Awakens Is A Social Justice Propaganda Film.” *Return of Kings*. Published December 20, 2015. www.returnofkings.com/75991/why-star-wars-the-force-awakens-is-a-social-justice-propaganda-film



Fans refuse to continue consuming the product despite the content itself as a way of punishing the offending creator. We have previously witnessed such actions in response to science fiction author Orson Scott Card⁸ and, most recently, with J.K. Rowling.

THE OPINIONS AND CONTROVERSIAL BEHAVIOR OF PUBLIC FIGURES

The writer J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter saga, has been one of the most notable figures who have, as of late, been the target of online attempts at cancelling. The Harry Potter fandom is undoubtedly vast and loyal. Furthermore, the case with Rowling is very particular because she, as an individual, manages the creation of the whole universe—including the world, characters, spinoffs, etc. —and somehow personifies its existence, unlike creators of properties with robust fandoms and similar cultural impact such as Star Wars, Star Trek and the Marvel Universe. Most importantly, she has purposefully designed her career and contracts in order to preserve as much control as possible over the Harry Potter brand. The roots of Rowling's recent cancellation kicked off when she tweeted in support of Maya Forstater, a woman who lost an employment tribunal case due to her intentionally misgendering of a trans coworker on the grounds that, to her belief, men could not change into women.⁹ Previously, the author had been known for liking tweets by well-known trans-exclusionary radical feminists (often known as TERFs).¹⁰ But, several months after tweeting about Maya's case, she accidentally posted a comment—which she originally meant for a child thanking him for his fanart—that included coarse language complaining about the attacks of anti-TERF groups on trans-exclusionary rad-

⁸ Orson Scott Card has been known to campaign against same-sex marriage laws and to defend that homosexuality is a consequence of child abuse. See O'Neal, Sean. 2013. "Ender's Game author Orson Scott Card issues plea for tolerance of his intolerance of gays." *AV Club*. Published July 9, 2013. <https://news.avclub.com/enders-game-author-orson-scott-card-issues-plea-for-tol-1798239112>

⁹ Noor, Poppy. 2019. "JK Rowling in row over court ruling on transgender issues." *The Guardian*. Published December 19, 2019. www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/19/jk-rowling-trans-row-court-ruling-twitter-maya-forstater

¹⁰ It is worth noting that TERF is an acronym for "trans-exclusionary radical feminist", a position with whom those who want to exclude transgender women from their feminist platforms identify with. However, it is common for cis-women who are referred to as TERFs by those calling out their alleged transphobic positions to understand this acronym as an insult.



ical feminists. After deleting the comment amidst preexisting backlash, Rowling began openly sharing her trans-exclusionary feminist stand.

After numerous back-and-forths with disappointed and angry fans, Rowling published an open letter further outlining her position. In it she argues that the online public reaction against her is pure censorship. Rowling claims that, by the time she decided to support Maya, she “must have been on [her] fourth or fifth cancellation” (Rowling 2020), reinforcing her position as the one who is being unjustly attacked. As in previously discussed cases, the consequence of the fandom’s disappointment has not exclusively been directed toward the author herself. A number of fans have shared online that their offense toward Rowling’s behavior has tainted the saga they used to love. Aja Romano, a writer for *Vox* and a fan of the *Harry Potter* series, describes her experience of having to put away all the books she owned by the author after reading about Rowling’s trans-exclusionary views:

I metaphorically boxed up years of intense participation in the *Harry Potter* fandom, [...] and nurturing the friendships I made within them. I still talk nearly every day to people I’ve known in *Harry Potter* fandom since my earliest days there. I resolved to compartmentalize my *Harry Potter* fandom identity as something over and done with, instead of thinking of it as a cornerstone of my identity. (Romano, 2020)

The fact that she speaks of the experience as part of her identity is very prevalent in fandom, especially in those as large as *Harry Potter*’s. Despite these kinds of reactions and Rowling’s complaints about her cancellation, the censorship she has supposedly suffered will most likely be inconsequential given the size of the *Harry Potter* franchise, as well as the wealth and fame she has already acquired. How trivial the repercussions of cancelling can be needs to be kept in mind when discussing the phenomenon in certain contexts, particularly when dealing with big corporations as we will see later. Regardless of the actual efficiency of cancelling, the central issue that we can observe here is how serious the problem appears to in-group members. While it is true that fans are genuinely affected by the harmful behavior of those they once admired (as can be seen in Romano’s statement above), what takes place within online communities tends to seem worse than it really is. Hence, this is how cancelling comes to be perceived as disproportionate.

The decision to stop consuming a cultural product that economically benefits cancelled individuals is framed as an ethical position. By virtue of being a moral issue,



the actual magnitude of the problem is irrelevant. In this context, giving money to someone is equated with supporting their views and attitude; while condoning the behavior but still consuming their work or products is defended on the grounds of the ontological separation between creator and creation. Ultimately, both positions are influenced by the role that attachment plays when dealing with content and people that are significant in your life, for your relationships and identity. On the one hand, when thinking about cancel culture, we have to keep in mind the personal investment of those who call for action against celebrities or cultural products they feel close to. But also, on the other hand, the emotional involvement of those who would justify and excuse any behavior cannot be overlooked. In this light, the line between genuine concern for social justice, resentment and cherry-picking whose behavior to excuse when a cancelling action involves celebrities—and oftentimes also parasocial relationships—is thin and complicated.

BIG CORPORATIONS AND OPEN LETTERS

Critics of cancel culture tend to highlight the oppression of those being cancelled. As J.K. Rowling's recent statements demonstrate, they see themselves as unquestionable victims. The context of the power imbalance in which cancellations take place is purposefully left out in these critiques, as well as the extreme unlikelihood of this type of high-end cancellations having long-term harmful effects on the accused. The disproportionate reaction on the part of those cancelled is a consequence of the medium used by fans to denounce them. Echo chambers distort what we perceive and the effects that an issue can have. Furthermore, when we examine how long people keep sharing information online about a certain issue, we notice that any act of cancelling is often short-lived. The cause is overshadowed by greater social problems and the impact of activism is quickly diluted in the sea of information shared on social media platforms.

The controversies and social turmoil surrounding cancelling have not gone unnoticed by corporations which, in many cases, try to save face by adapting to the complaints of their consumers and audiences. A recent controversial instance that ignited criticism about cancel culture is the case of *Gone with the Wind* on HBO Max. The video-on-demand platform temporarily removed the 1939 movie with the goal of providing appropriate context to the racial stereotypes it presents. Those who saw the company's actions as censorship resulting from social pressure deemed the re-



removal of the movie unnecessary. HBO's decision, however, was not simply driven by an attempted online cancellation. It was influenced by the Black Lives Matter movement that was gaining momentum at the time with an increasing number of protests around the US. Furthermore, it was specifically prompted by a direct request from John Ridley, screenwriter of *12 Years a Slave* (Ridley 2020). Finally, the movie was, shortly after, made available once again accompanied by an introductory disclaimer that provides historical context (Spangler 2020).

Despite the platform having restored the movie providing context—specifically offering what online discussions are often not capable of—the case was taken as an example of a call for censoring. In academic contexts, a complaint began circulating regarding how students were now likely to complain about the content of a course syllabus in the hopes of direct censorship instead of opening a debate and considering the actual cultural and historical relevance of a novel, movie or creator perceived as racist and/or sexist. This sentiment has spread to journalistic environments, writers and other intellectuals, some of whom signed an open letter shared in *Harper's Magazine* in June 2020 complaining about the unapologetic censorship that cancel culture is calling for. Afterwards, many similar letters were published in different countries. Among those who signed these letters, we find people who do hold progressive views and have often fought for minorities' rights but who, nowadays, see their position as notable figures within their movements called into question (i.e.: their relative positions of power and in-group influence). The behaviors challenged in such contexts are often seen as going too far. Every position needs to be carefully evaluated and ideally accompanied by debate and, most importantly, criticism—even when it involves someone we admire.

The letter published in *Harper's Magazine* argues that “[the] restriction of debate [...] invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation” (2020). This distinction is very important and it sums up the idea that lies behind acts of cancelling that supposedly fight for social justice. In theory, from the assumed moral standpoint, they should exclusively target oppressors. While the letter claims that—not only sometimes but “invariably”—cancelling processes affect the less powerful, it purposely avoids referring to any specific examples, presumably, because some of those signing have been “cancelled” for attacking those in clearly inferior positions of power and influence (i.e.: J.K. Rowling and Stephen Pinker).



The letter goes on to tackle another problem that cancelling has, namely, the triviality of the issues it focuses on. It argues that “heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes” (Harper’s 2020). From the moral stand mentioned above, it is important, however, to define what can be considered a clumsy mistake—and, presumably, the apology that follows up—as opposed to what is actually a more substantial issue. Following such reasoning, these allegedly less powerful people would consequently be banned from further sharing their opinions or doing their work for committing an inconsequential mistake. This fear of censorship assumes that those who control the mainstream public discourse are the ones making the calls for cancelling action. Ironically, those in power rarely lose their privilege or money, and the assumption misrepresents who is really in a position of power and how said power is wielded.

POLITICS AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

What cancel culture is said to assume, and the source of some academics’ worries, is that “social justice must be pursued via attempts to banish from the public sphere, as much as possible, all opinions that they interpret as insufficiently opposed to power differentials” (McWhorter 2020). Nevertheless, this is not something new that originated with online activism. Public shaming has traditionally played a central role in social change, with certain worldviews becoming progressively less acceptable within a given society. Characterizing this process as merely punishment continues to be criticized by those who are skeptical of the role of cancel culture in democratic societies. For instance, both Rowling and Pinker have experienced actual consequences. The Harry Potter author returned the Ripple of Hope, awarded by the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights organization and given to those with a “commitment to social change,” after facing criticism from the president of the organization.¹¹ Pinker, on the other hand, has faced more direct consequences, as he was stripped of his Linguistic Society of America fellow status.¹²

¹¹ Kerry, Kennedy. 2020. “A Statement from Kerry Kennedy. President of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights.” *RFK Human Rights*. Published August 3, 2020. rfkhumanrights.org/news/a-statement-from-kerry-kennedy-president-of-robert-f-kennedy-human-rights

¹² Powel. Michael. 2020. “How a Famous Harvard Professor Became a Target Over His Tweets.” *The New York Times*. Published July 15, 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/us/steven-pinker-harvard.html



These repercussions inflame criticism. John McWhorter, associate professor at Columbia University, asserts that he sees “professors living in constant fear for their career because their opinions are incompatible with the current woke playbook” (2020). On the other side of the argument, *The Atlantic* staff writer Hanna Giorgis defends that facing public criticism does not represent a real threat to freedom of speech (2020). The problem is thus framed as a political issue and as an accusation of not being politically left enough (McWhorter 2020). The question here is whether the rights and proper treatment of minorities are an issue that can be discussed in terms of political leanings. The biases that some professors might have are not mere personal opinions or “clumsy mistakes,” but a consequence of systemic racism, sexism and homophobia. In the academic context, professionals sometimes react to online criticism using the same language as those who denounced HBO’s treatment of *Gone with the Wind*. Despite the fact that, in this movie’s case, the “censorship” resulted in simple additions that appropriately contextualized the movie to protect the rights of African Americans by acknowledging a historical misrepresentation of slavery. In theory, a university classroom should be the ideal environment to provide students with similar contextualization.

Going back to the definitions shared at the beginning of this article, criticism around SJWs and cancel culture is mediated by the perception of in-group and out-group members, with those outside of a group attempting to silence its members. As US President Donald Trump put it in his 2020 4th of July speech “[o]ne of [the left’s] political weapons is ‘cancel culture’—driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees” (Trump, 2020). Contrary to this complaint—and as we have seen through several examples—cancelling posts are not always motivated by progressive thought. Radical alt-right groups have numerous and very active online communities. They organize, influence opinions and disseminate biased information.¹³ In the end, considering the context provided by the existence of echo chambers and the emotional involvement that cancelling often entails, these actions are first and foremost a way to vent anger about social issues in a way that feels much safer than engaging in “real-life” activism or

¹³ See: Hodge, Edwin and Hallgrimsdottir, Helga. 2020. “Networks of Hate: The Alt-right, “Troll Culture”, and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online.” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 32.4: 563-580.



even debate. Nonetheless, these online actions are likely to have a strong impact on the cultural and political landscape, just like some academic circles have perceived.

The problem with criticism of cancel culture is that it inevitably ends up creating the same Manichean narrative that proliferates in the media coverage and, just as the actions it criticizes, leaves little room for debate. As Ng argues “cancel culture itself is now subject to being cancelled, even as others have pointed to how the negative effects on the people targeted have been exaggerated” (623). The position presented within public discourse is that you either actively engage in cancelling, or you adamantly oppose it. The issue is very complex and there are many factors to take into account, from the people involved in the cancelling—both the ones who purported it and the accused—to the established power relationships between them. And, in the case of corporations, while one should always be aware that their actions are motivated by profit, providing audiences with additional context and fostering debate can have very positive effects. While the cancelling process in itself is often short-lived, the issues that underlie the criticism – be it homophobia, transphobia, or gender violence – are very prevalent in society. In this context, part of the purpose behind cancelling is to ensure that individual instances that contribute to systemic problems do not continue to be swept under the rug.

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