

Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

Cancel Culture: Judge, Jury and Executioner. Rule of Law ignored as everything goes in the box to the left.

Matthew Matten, marketing student dives into the current phenomenon of Cancel Culture, revealing its origins, history and evolution.

He provides an in-depth analysis of how this relatively fledging form of protest has evolved into a seriously powerful force to be reckoned with by international corporations, governments and individuals. He provides a timeline of its growth fuelled by social media and other online platforms, that has left it changing the face of culture and the world, unchecked by the Rule of Law.

Introduction

Cancel Culture: judge, Jury and Executioner. Rule of law ignored as everything goes in a box to the left!

The majority of developed countries in the world today exist with little turmoil in society due to the Rule of Law relevant in that jurisdiction.

That rule of law has evolved over time due to changes in cultural values within each society, which have been progressed slowly and carefully by the legislators of the country. This has allowed for more and more freedoms to the citizens of each country to live in a manner to which they believe is consistent with their individual moral's values and identity, while still abiding by the Rule of Law in order to maintain order.

The above statement also is reflected in organizations' culture, who while faster moving than government, still took time to carefully consider progressive changes to their policies and procedures.

Pressure on governments, organizations, and other cultural groups to change has become immense and fast moving due to the rapidly growing 'Cancel culture', being fueled by social media and other online and highly distributable mediums.

The uprising of social media has resulted in the creation of a powerful tool that any member of society can use to make allegations and force action against individuals, businesses, brands and media works. While this 'tool' can have positive and negative outcomes, the concern we face is how to regulate the content, where when and for what cause.

In our modern society, if something is deemed to be offensive or politically incorrect then it can be "cancelled", or revoked at an incredible fast pace. The most prevalent issue is the damage incurred to a reputation, be it an individual's personal reputation or the public image of a brand or organisation. The destruction of this image, "without a trial" can have lasting detrimental effects in terms of opportunities being stripped and loss of cultural admiration.

Consequently, members of the population who may disagree with the vocal "cancel culture" voices are too scared to speak up in defence through fear of being targeted themselves and therefore remain silent. This is chilling similarity of the events of World War II and is utterly terrifying.

The concept of freedom of speech is challenged by 'cancel culture'. For the most part we do have the ability to share our views and opinions, however, we now have to be incredibly careful and mindful of anything we choose to share if a group or individual is troubled by our comment it can result in an onslaught of hate speech via the instrument of social media. Essentially, in today's society if you release something that is overly conservative or mildly offensive, or speak up in defence of another targeted individual, the woke hall monitors on social media will find you! Even more so if you are influential.

Origins

The concept behind the modern term “cancel culture” is not new, however, the rise of social media has catered for the process of ‘cancelling’ to become significantly more rapid, easily accessible and significantly more harmful.

Dating back to medieval times, we can draw similarities to hangings, the pillory and other public shaming techniques to online shaming attacks. The major difference is volume of people and the speed of dissemination of the ideal. Shaming techniques in those past eras may have been more physically disturbing and agonizing, the mental trauma and stress faced by those targeted online today is an unparalleled experience.

The terminology of being “cancelled” only started to gain traction in 2014 when Cisco Rosado, a cast member from reality TV show *Love and Hip-Hop*, tells his love interest Diamond Strawberry, “*you’re cancelled*”. This quote then began to grow on social media soon after the episode aired. People started using the term in a humorous manner saying things like

“Ima start telling people “you’re canceled, out of my face” -Scotty (@scotty2thotty_). “

The cancel culture trend gained further momentum with the uprising of the *#MeToo* movement, where victims of sexual assault and abuse made a stand and came out about their experiences. This movement can perhaps be credited for the realization of how much power social media can have when masses combine their forces and posts go viral. As the online world has started to embrace this new term, its influence as a tool of humiliation has morphed into something far more powerful.

The Cancel Culture does not initially have a sole leader or ongoing following, and those who partake do so erratically, and potentially only as a once off. They don’t share an understanding, however if the particular target gains traction or virality, a new faction or organisation is formed quickly with a rising membership and contributory base.

Cancel culture is often used interchangeably with call out culture. Call out culture aims to publicly humiliate brands, celebrities or individuals for something they have done that is considered to be unacceptable or offensive or politically incorrect. Some people within society believe that this is a toxic form of behaviour others perceive it as a power that holds people accountable for offensive and hurtful actions and words. Cancel culture is similar in the aspect of publicly shaming, it differs however, with the aim of culturally boycotting a brand or individual to their detriment. Cancel culture exceeds criticism and forms a barrier to prevent growth. Call out culture quite often does lead to ‘cancellation’, so the two do go hand in hand.

Major Organisations

The proclivity for and ease of access to social media and other online forums has enabled, groups who were once limited to members in a refined or targeted geographical area or social or professional group or organisation to form structured and well-planned organisations with a worldwide membership base.

Organisations such as extinction rebellion which now boasts 650 “franchises” in 45 countries are able to mobilise within minutes and without warning to would-be targets. Similar organisations such as Black Lives Matter boast over 8 million active users in 30 countries worldwide, with 350 “Franchises”. Another, organisation “Stop Funding Hate”, again purely run online, even boasts in its accounts which it now submits to the FCA, to having a strong balance sheet and remunerating its directors.

The “He for She organization” was launched by Ban ki Moon the UN Secretary – General. This organisation provided legitimacy for the above similar organisations and can be recognised as the catalyst for the growth, popularity and legitimacy of the viral movements as a whole.

If we look into these organisations we can conclude that social media has played a pivotal role in allowing them to exist and operate, and without this internet network, they simply could not exist in the way that they do.

Cost / Detriment

In modern times it is considered essential to be “woke” or in other words, be actively aware of how our actions will affect others and society. This particularly relates to our opinions and what we publicly support. The harsh consequence of not obtaining a “woke” mindset is a digital bashing, made possible only by social media. Many people who may contribute towards the shaming and potential “cancelling” of another entity may have no idea of the magnitude that their single input can generate. Collectively, these individual comments create a virtual tsunami which has the ability to ruin the name and reputation of a person or brand.

This culture is costing individuals and brands both intrinsically and extrinsically. Once classed as an offender brands have greater options for apologies or ways of solving the issue, where individuals, may lack those resources. We can examine the example of a man who was fired from his job after a video of him verbally abusing an elderly woman at Costco went viral. The company was quick to act and severed ties with the individual, claiming that, “their behaviour in the video is in direct conflict with our company values”. This demonstrates how in this situation; the company had the resources and power to avoid serious damage from the cancel culture.

However, the man who was fired now had a permanently damaged reputation which will influence his ability to get employment in the future.

There are other instances where large scale brands have suffered significant losses due to pressure from cancel culture. The brand Coon Cheese, which has now been renamed as Cheer Cheese, suffered a serious blow to its reputation and generated a massive expense as a result of cancel culture. The brand was accused of being insensitive to the Indigenous Australian people through their brand name. This brought on a social onslaught, pressuring them into acting to resurrect their company. While the brand name was not intended to have any racist context, modern society values have deemed it to be problematic, therefore leaving the company with no choice but to comply or go under.

There was backlash after rapper Eminem released his album *Music To Be Murdered By*, earlier this year. The controversy relating to select lyrics and themes within a particular song in the album. This verse was, “but I’m contemplating yelling ‘bombs away’ on the game like I’m outside of an Ariana Grande concert waiting,” Eminem rapped on the second track of the album, titled “Unaccommodating”. Many media outlets and individuals launched

attacks at Eminem for what they took as a gruesome hyperbole. A hashtag (#eminemiscancelled) began trending on twitter shortly after the release of the album, particularly promoted by Ariana fans.

This style of writing is not new for Eminem though. He has presented confronting messages and lyrics in his music throughout his career, and this shock factor has often conjured a controversial response from listeners and society. Those who are reacting in such a manner clearly don't understand who Eminem is as a musical artist, and his style of composition. He has always presented confronting, gruesome themes and used dark humour, which is not supposed to be taken literally. Eminem meant no disrespect to the victims of the bombing or their families, this is reinforced by the millions that he raised for the families of those affected directly after the event occurred. Furthermore, the artist's lead single of the album is a plea for the end of gun violence, creating a clear message that Eminem does not condone acts of violence or terrorism. Considering these factors, it is clear that those who attempted to "cancel" Eminem had heard that one lyric from his song and formed an opinion of him as an artist from it. Ariana fans may have even just jumped on the band wagon of hate in support of her, without actually listening to the song themselves, let alone the entire album.

This presents the primary issue with cancel culture. If an individual decides that something that someone does is not acceptable, they can establish a large following of people on social media to come on board with the same idea, often without those people fact-checking what they are choosing to support. This in turn creates a dangerous society to live in, since anyone who is in the limelight can suddenly become guilty without being given the opportunity to be proven innocent. While large entities that have established names or careers might be able to recover from the online onslaught, it's more of a serious issue for new names that are emerging. If someone who is aspiring to be in the spotlight receives a "cancelling" comment from a semi-influential person, their chance of reaching that goal can be made near impossible.

Conclusion

The terms "Cancel Culture" and "Woke" have become significant in our modern lexicon. An intolerance to progressive ideologies accompanied by a desire to seek retribution by excluding those who don't have parallel views has become a serious threat to democracy and our freedom of speech.

We are seeing people being accused now for things that they had said or done long in the past, with no rule of law, effectively being trialled by social media and being guilty before being proven innocent. Furthermore, due to the silence of those that would be supporters their "guilty" verdict inevitably remains unchanged.

These past actions may be problematic in current times, they may not have been at the time of occurrence. Holding someone accountable for this essentially enforces the idea that people are not allowed to change, and if you make a mistake, you are eternally guilty. Being held accountable for something from your distant past is not creating justice. This strongly challenges the positive view of cancel culture.

In society today, conservatives or indeed capitalists or right-wing thinkers, are too scared to speak their mind in fear that they might offend someone. In fact, studies show that 63% of people share this viewpoint and are left with no choice but to remain silent. It is a critical human right to be able to speak freely, no one should be able to take away what is in our minds and hearts. Some are arguing that Cancel Culture is giving people a voice, but in reality, this toxic trend is destabilising society and taking away the ability for people to speak freely, in fear of being persecuted by not just another individual, but the masses online who personally have nothing to do with the expressed thought or idea. The notion of being politically correct is spiraling out of control, leaving people in a confused state, where they are lacking in power and stripped of freedom to speak out with no oversight.

Effectively the very thing that gives this movement momentum – virality or a viral post, should perhaps be what it is labelled – A VIRUS that needs a cure.

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