

Cancelling 'cancel culture': An examination of the harms and ineffectiveness of 'cancel culture'.

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Abstract:

This paper offers an examination into 'cancel culture' and how it is creating a toxic and censored environment online. Looking at instances of the culture affecting one's reputation, it's creation of a mass mentality online, and how the result of its punishments can have larger ramifications than the problematic act that caused them, this paper seeks to show the harms and ineffectiveness 'cancel culture' has on online networks and individuals.

Introduction:

The creation of an online world has led to many revolutions in instantaneous communication, this form of communication has led to many contributions to online activism and how it can reach many different audiences (Freelon et al., 2020), previously activists would have to rely on mainstream media such as news platforms to gain a following and gain support for their issue, leading to a lot of problems going unnoticed around the world (Freelon et al., 2020), due to the rise of digital media, activists are able to avoid having to go through mainstream media and can use their own platforms to attract attention (Freelon et al., 2020), yet some forms of online activism over individuals or organisations committing problematic acts can go too far and become an attack on someone's reputation, privacy, and freedom of expression, this form can sometimes be termed as 'cancel culture'. 'Cancel culture' is the withdrawal of support such as viewing, following, and refusal to buy products associated with the targeted individual or organisation and can be a way to publicly address their wrongdoings which often have to do with sexism, homophobia, assault, and racism (Ng, 2020). "Cancel culture" originated on the social media site, Twitter, where hashtags such as #cancelled and ones directed at problematic individuals began to take rise as a form of showing judgement and criticism (Sailofsky, 2021), however the idea of 'cancelling' someone is not new. History shows that marginalised groups were often silenced and had their view's restricted if they were not aligned with the more traditional and "white" status quo, so given the rise of mainstream social media previously silenced groups are now able to speak out against wrongdoings of more powerful individuals and organisations (Sailofsky, 2021) which has seen "a reversal of who has the power to hold others accountable" (Sailofsky, 2021, p. 4). Despite often being used to restrict problematic individuals' platforms and income, the rapid rise of 'cancel culture' itself has become problematic due to its ability to permanently ruin reputations, its creation of a herd mentality online which limits individuality, and its long-lasting impacts it can have on targeted individuals. As 'cancel culture' has asserted itself online, its reputation for holding prominent figures accountable has diminished, as now less important individuals are being targeted for single problematic acts that happened in the distant past (Ng, 2020), however despite being less influential to society these individuals are subjected to the same amount of criticism as someone who has a history of problematic acts (Ng, 2020). The usefulness of 'cancel culture' has also been questioned due to the fact that many of its negative effects on the targeted individuals are often exaggerated with some being able to continue their careers in the limelight (Ng, 2020), these negatives and proven redundancies of 'cancel culture' have caused the act to be subject to its own cancellation.

Harms to reputation and career:

As social media use continues to rise, users have been given platforms to speak out on sensitive topics, however these controversial subjects being discussed online often causes users to have an enhanced emotional reaction and increases the willingness for individuals to start arguments (Whiting et al., 2019). Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a controversial topic which often leads to large online engagement, particularly when involving notable figures, as was the case in 2016 when actress, Amber Heard, accused her then-husband, Johnny Depp, of emotional and physical abuse (Whiting et al., 2019). After shedding light on the alleged abuse, social media users from around began to offer their perspective on the topic, despite being outsiders to the events thousands commented on who was at fault and the punishments they should receive (Whiting et al., 2019). Although not knowing the facts or dynamics of the relationship, many users were quick to make accusations of who was at fault, which amplified the toxic comments and led to further victim-blaming as users argued over their opinions (Whiting et al., 2019). Following the allegations and mass online abuse Johnny Depp was labelled as a wife-beater, this severely impacted his reputation and caused him economic losses, despite Depp having 22 statements in support of him and Heard's testimony having low-credibility (Silva, 2021). Users participating in 'cancel culture' often lack an understanding of relevance or

timeliness for an incident they deem offensive, the 'cancellation' of director, James Gunn, supports this. In 2018, Gunn was at the centre of a scandal after nearly 10-year-old tweets, where Gunn had joked about child abuse, resurfaced; criticism of James Gunn would have been warranted if not for the fact that he had previously apologised for the tweets in 2012 (Abramovitch, 2012). Although Gunn was prevented from directing a new movie, this was only temporary as after the attempts at 'cancelling' him proved to be successful, stars of the upcoming movie continually supported him which led to his reinstatement (Fleming, 2019). This failed attempt at dismantling someone's career shows how 'cancel culture' will inevitably fail when it's use is unwarranted, while the public outcry over the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard allegations shows how 'cancel culture' can create a mass of ignorance.

The inhibition of differing views:

Social media has evolved from its previous use of information exchange, it now provides an opportunity for individuals to take part in social movements and form a participatory culture (Velasco, 2020). Users have used self-selected networks as forms for communication to discuss shared interests, causing the emergence of networked individualism (Velasco, 2020) Social media users often form groups relating to their shared interests, as the users have free choice over the groups they align themselves with, they often refrain from examining different viewpoints (Velasco, 2020), this can lead to a collective consciousness where thoughts and beliefs in groups can combine creating an environment where differing views are seen as problematic and undesirable (Velasco, 2020). This current culture of 'cancellation' has created an intolerant climate where individuals are unable to voice their own opinions if they differ from the dominant ones, this online environment is there for enacting an ideological purge that prevents debates and amplifies self-censorship (Velasco, 2020). The condemnation of notable figures has seen a rise due to social media giving users the opportunity to become a collective that can act as judge, jury, and executioner over someone's reputation, as Mueller (2021) suggests "the call to cancel spreads like wildfire and is uncontrollable". Although some may seem 'cancel culture' as a form of social activism it can also be seen as digital vigilantism, with many stating that a fear of being 'cancelled' can have a large impact on society and children, as it prevents free thinking and the development of debate (Mueller, 2021). 'Cancel culture' is now viewed as a tool to silence and inhibit the expression of different ideas, and has caused debate as to whether freedom of speech still exists online (Mueller, 2021), there are also views that the mass use and fear of 'cancel culture' has reduced risk-taking and created an environment where individuals must conform to the normative views to avoid the risk of being targeted by the 'mob' and having their reputation unjustly tarnished (Mueller, 2021), or having their private information leaked as a form of punishment.

'Cancel culture' punishments:

Many online users choose to remain anonymous when interacting with other strangers online, however this anonymity can be relinquished when users are subjected to 'doxxing'. 'Doxxing' is the non-consensual publishing of private details such as full name, address, and place of work, and is often used to harm someone's reputation or silence them (Lee, 2020). 'Doxxing' can be used in extreme cases of 'cancel culture' as there have been instances where individuals have been 'doxxed' for having different political views (Lee, 2020). At first, problematic behaviour may seem to need an immediate punishment that fits the actions of the targeted individual but often these attacks against their reputation and livelihood are pushed too far, due to the ability to be instantly shared anyone can be recognised when caught doing something morally wrong, after being recognised the individuals may be at risk of losing their job if the masses push for their employer to take action, everything about the individual can be used against them such as photos of family and friends which get turned into memes or mash-ups (Bouvier, 2020), and the individuals may also be subjected to hate speech as a form of punishment, which can lead to social disorders and violence.

When it can be useful:

Despite there being many callouts as to why 'cancel culture' needs to be removed from online culture, there are some instances where it has been effective, and its results been beneficial to society. Although being subject to it himself, director James Gunn, expressed support for the method when it came to certain individuals such as Harvey Weinstein (White, 2021). 'Cancel culture' can empower a community which can be used to stand up to intolerant views and spread awareness on important issues, for instance in 2020 author, J.K Rowling, was 'cancelled' after offending the transgender community, this caused many fans to turn on her and even have sites associated with her book series, Harry Potter, renounce her (Velasco, 2020). Some forms of 'cancel culture' can be seen as a

way to celebrate unheard voices and prevent the more conservative views from being the only viewpoint discussed and accepted online, it could also be argued that 'cancel culture' has created an online environment of multiculturalism, anti-racism, and acceptance (Duque et al., 2021). However, despite the occasional times where 'cancel culture' is able to draw attention to problematic views, they are often overlooked or forgotten when enough time passes, showing the ineffectiveness of it.

Conclusion:

Social medias impact on communication has changed the way users form connections and create networks, yet despite this advancement and possibility for positivity, many still continue to use online spaces as a tool for harassment and intimidation. The ability to share your thoughts with the masses and have your personal views published for thousands to see has led to many facing the negative side of mass communication, 'cancel culture'. This culture of judgement and abuse has seen many reputations damaged such as Johnny Depp's (Silva, 2021), a rise in fear of speaking out against the collective (Velasco, 2020), and the private lives of many published for the world to see (Lee, 2020). Unless 'cancel culture' evolves into a more constructive tool, its use will diminish out of fear as "everyone has skeletons in their closets; anyone, therefore, can be subjected to the culture of cancellation" (Velasco, 2020, p. 6).

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