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## Cancel Culture

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Cancel culture is a form of group shaming, often social media–based, usually targeted at celebrities and other notable public figures. "Canceling" as a public reaction to a particular person's objectionable opinions or actions usually takes the form of a de facto boycott of the target's work and an online campaign to draw attention to the perceived offenses and damage the wrongdoer's cultural reputation.

Cancel culture campaigns have been undertaken in reaction to reports of sexual misconduct, discrimination, use of hateful language, or an association with controversial groups or figures. While social media is usually the primary outlet of cancel culture, a cancellation may lead to profound effects on a person's life. Some targets of cancel culture have been fired or suspended by their employers, inhibiting their ability to earn money. Celebrities may retreat entirely from public life as a result, though this is often temporary.

There is disagreement about the extent, effectiveness, and severity of cancel culture. Some distinguish between cancel culture and call-out culture. Call-out culture is generally considered less severe than cancel culture, as it encourages people to understand why they have been targeted and to exhibit a willingness to engage with critics and atone for their past actions.

The #MeToo Twitter campaign and the Black Lives Matter movement have both included elements of cancel culture, seen by many as a necessary reckoning with the pervasive sexual abuse of women and the systemic racism of contemporary society.

Pros and Cons of "Canceling" Celebrities on Social Media

### Pros

- Canceling celebrities for allegations of serious misconduct offers consequences for criminal or objectionable behavior, and the publicity may lead to investigations and arrests for serious offenses.
- Cancel culture amplifies the voices of traditionally marginalized communities.
- Canceling celebrities may lead to better cultural attitudes and new laws protecting women from harassment in the workplace.

### Cons

- Some allegations made on social media are unprovable, and reactions may turn into bullying or be too severe in relation to the offenses.
- Cancel culture may help promote self-censorship of controversial opinions, particularly among journalists and on college campuses.
- Canceling impedes opportunities for dialogue and understanding between celebrities and the communities impacted by their actions.

## Origins and Early Examples

While the term *cancel culture* is a twenty-first-century phenomenon, cancel culture has historical roots. People throughout American history have engaged in punitive mob actions against people deemed to have trespassed on moral or ethical codes. In the American colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, public shaming was a common component of official punishment. People were put on public display in stocks or pillories. Some laws required criminals to brandish signs or letters—in some cases, literally branded on the person's body. The fictionalized story of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* vividly portrays shaming as a punishment for adultery in seventeenth-century New England. However, shaming as an official type of punishment mostly disappeared from the US legal system after independence.

Business and cultural boycotts have been effective catalysts for change as means to amplify the voices of marginalized people. The 1955–1956 bus boycotts undertaken by African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, in protest of the segregation laws of the Jim Crow era gained national attention, ultimately concluding in a Supreme Court ruling declaring segregation unconstitutional. During the early years of the Cold War, many Americans feared a potential rise in Soviet-era Communism. The House of Representatives created the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1938 to investigate those suspected of disloyalty to the United States. In 1947 many Hollywood celebrities were subpoenaed to testify before the committee. Ten of them refused to testify and were eventually jailed. The resulting controversy and public outcry led to the Hollywood Blacklist, an agreement among movie studios not to employ writers, actors, producers, or directors accused of having communist sympathies.

As the internet and social media grew, rapid group responses to objectionable actions became more commonplace. In an early example from 2013, Justine Sacco, a communications director for an internet firm, posted a series of racist tweets to her 170 followers before turning her phone off during a flight to South Africa from New York. Within hours, as her tweets were noticed by a growing audience, thousands of angry responses made #HasJustineLandedYet the number one trending Twitter hashtag. By the time her flight landed eleven hours later, she had been fired from her job. Sacco apologized but also insisted that her tweets had been sarcasm intended to mock stereotypical racist American attitudes.

Social blogging platform Tumblr also included many early examples of cancel culture, most famously with the now-defunct blog *Your Fave is Problematic*. Beginning in 2013, the popular blog detailed racist, sexist, or otherwise problematic past behavior by celebrities. Critics of the blog and the larger concept of cancel culture have pointed out that everyone, including celebrities, is flawed in some way, and the demonization of people for past mistakes is both unfair and counterproductive.

Cancel culture is often intertwined with social justice issues. In 2017 new allegations of sexual abuse at the hands of R&B singer R. Kelly came to light. Though he had been accused of many instances of sexual impropriety in the past, the new details of his alleged masterminding of a "sex cult" that included very young women were especially troubling for many. Atlanta activist Oronike Odeleye crafted a petition to ban R. Kelly's music from Atlanta-area radio stations. Odeleye and Kenyette Barnes soon started the #MuteRKelly campaign, which sought to publicize Kelly's longstanding sexual abuse allegations and to end financial and cultural support for his career. As of September 2020, R. Kelly is awaiting trial, while Odeleye and Barnes have expanded their campaign to include the removal of R. Kelly's music from streaming platforms.

The #MeToo movement, which seeks to expose allegations of sexual assault and harassment by powerful men, is often regarded as a part of cancel culture. African American activist and youth worker Tarana Burke is credited with originating the hashtag in 2006 on the social networking site Myspace. Burke began using the phrase to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse in society, especially among Black children. In 2017 the #MeToo movement began in earnest with the exposure of widespread sexual abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein, a prominent Hollywood executive. In February 2020 Weinstein was convicted of rape and sentenced to twenty-three years in prison. Recent changes in societal attitudes toward sexual harassment and misconduct have been referred to as the "Weinstein effect."

## Strengthening or Stifling Debate?

Some have argued that the term "cancel culture" itself is used derisively to silence the legitimate criticisms brought about by the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements and other recent cultural shifts. Proponents of cancel culture assert that holding people accountable for their actions is a vital function of society. They also contend that cancel culture seeks to create lasting change and open a wider dialogue about important issues like sexual abuse, racism, sexism, and transphobia, amplifying often-marginalized voices.

Critics have argued that cancel culture stifles debate and encourages self-censorship of potentially controversial ideas. Some also contend that cancel culture, which often involves the uncovering of often decades-old offenses by critics, is merely an attempt to humiliate powerful people; in effect, cyberbullying.

In 2018 popular comedian Kevin Hart was announced as the host of the 2019 Academy Awards. Benjamin Lee, an editor at *The Guardian*, posted images of homophobic tweets Hart had posted years before. In the ensuing uproar, Hart was initially defiant, though he eventually apologized. Within days, Hart was removed as the 2019 Academy Awards host.

In July 2020 Boeing communications chief Niel Golightly resigned from his position after an employee complained about an article Golightly had written in 1987 that argued that women should not serve in military combat roles. He apologized, saying the article was an old and misguided contribution by a Cold War veteran to the debate about women's roles in the military.

The debate over cancel culture and its impact is particularly strong on college campuses. For example, in June 2020 Cornell freshman running back prospect Nate Panza was removed from the football team and subsequently left the school after a Snapchat video surfaced showing him using a racial slur. In September 2020 Greg Patton, a professor at the University of Southern California, was placed on leave for using a Chinese expression that sounds like a racial slur during a virtual class. Students wrote to college officials, complaining that Patton had deliberately pronounced the word to sound like a racial slur.

In July 2020 *Harper's Magazine* published "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate." The open letter, which criticized the restriction of open debate and stifling of controversial ideas, was widely seen as a rebuke of cancel culture. The letter was signed by 153 people, including linguist Noam Chomsky, chess champion Gary Kasparov, author J. K. Rowling, and political activist Gloria Steinem. A response letter, titled "A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate," criticized the original letter as misguided, coming from a place of power that ignores the often-marginalized people using cancel culture to effect social change.

### Critical Thinking Questions

- How, if at all, do the roots of cancel culture relate to the struggle for civil rights in the United States?
- Do you think it is fair to cancel someone for controversial actions or social media postings from many years in the past? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, does cancel culture help or harm efforts to make American society more responsive to social justice issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia? Explain your answer.

## Consequences of Cancellation

The consequences of being canceled can vary considerably. While some of those targeted with accusations face job losses, ruined reputations, and in some cases legal repercussions, others are significantly less impacted. Proponents of cancel culture argue that these consequences are generally mild or temporary, while the publicity surrounding them may help to form a more inclusive, accountable society.

In 2017 comedian Louis C. K. admitted to several instances of long-rumored past sexual misconduct after accusations were published in the *New York Times*. The premiere of his upcoming film was canceled, and Netflix, HBO, and FX cut all ties with him. C. K. retreated from public life for a period but began performing in comedy clubs again in 2018. Before the accusations came to light, C. K. would routinely sell out large theaters and arenas. In one 2018 club performance, he told the audience that the controversy had cost him \$35 million.

Politicians have also been the subjects of cancel culture campaigns. In November 2017 several women came forward with accusations of sexual misconduct against then-senator Al Franken. Democratic leaders urged him to step down, which he did in December. In 2019 he returned to public life with a political radio show on SiriusXM.

Meghan Murphy, a Canadian journalist and opponent of transgender rights legislation, was permanently suspended from Twitter in 2019 for misgendering a trans woman. In 2019 comedian Shane Gillis was announced as a new cast member of *Saturday Night Live*. Within a few hours, clips of Gillis making racist and homophobic statements surfaced online. He was fired that same day. In 2020, after tweeting in support of the Black Lives Matter protests, actor Hartley Sawyer was fired from the television show *The Flash* after racist and misogynistic tweets from 2012 resurfaced.

When someone is canceled, a public apology is often given. The effectiveness of such apologies varies; some are seen as sincere, while others are dismissed as hollow and self-serving, which may impact their return to public life. In 2017 actor Kevin Spacey was accused of making sexual advances to a then-underage Anthony Rapp at a party in 1986. Several others came forward with similar accusations of sexual misconduct and harassment. Spacey, who had never previously discussed his sexuality, came out as a gay man in his apology statement. Many observers rejected the apology, arguing that the move was made in an attempt to deflect attention from the serious allegations. Spacey has not worked as an actor since the allegations came to light. Some celebrities remain defiant and unremorseful after cancel culture campaigns. In 2018 comedian Roseanne Barr was removed from the hit television show *Roseanne* after tweeting a racist jab at former Obama adviser Valerie Jarrett. Though she initially apologized, she quickly changed her stance and blamed her defense of Israel as the true reason for the cancellation.

Some instances of cancel culture have led to measurable change. In 1998 a former assistant to Harvey Weinstein named Zelda Parks signed a nondisclosure agreement as part of a settlement of her allegations of sexual abuse. In 2017 she violated the NDA to speak out, risking a lawsuit against her. In 2018, partly as a result of gains in visibility for victims of sex crimes created by the #MeToo movement, California governor Jerry Brown signed into law a ban on nondisclosure agreements involving sexual assault, harassment, or discrimination.

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