

The Danger of Cancel Culture

by Bobby Myers | July 7, 2020



Understanding Cancel Culture

Cancel Culture is a “behavior that mostly plays out on the internet when someone has said or done something to which others object. That person is condemned in a flurry of social media posts. Such people are often referred to as ‘canceled,’ a way of saying that many others are fed up with them and will have no more to do with them.” (Rueb, 2019)

In a “Style” section exposé from *The New York Times* titled “Tales from a Teenage Cancel Culture,” a group of teenagers were provided a platform on the topic. Neelam, 17, said, “When it comes to cancel culture, it’s a way to take away someone’s power and call out the individual for being problematic. I don’t think it’s being sensitive. I think it’s just having a sense of being observant and aware of what’s going on around you.” (Yar, 2019)

The awareness Neelam describes as being “observant and aware,” is commonly referred to as being “woke,” a political term that describes alertness to injustices or ideas or language deemed unacceptable in contemporary social thought. Ben, 17, adds that canceling someone “takes away the option for them to learn from their mistakes and kind of alienates them.” (Yar, 2019)

“Tales from a Teenage Cancel Culture” details two examples of people who were canceled. When asked why she was canceled, 15-year-old L was told it was because she was a “mooch,” “annoying,” “petty,” and an “emotional leech who was thirsty for validation.” L cited those reasonings as a source of emerging self-doubt and depressed self-esteem.

In the case of D, a college freshman, being canceled for a homophobic set of comments resulted in written and verbally expressed apologies by D. His apology was partially rejected, the full acceptance of it became conditional. D’s initial regret and sorrow gave way to frustration and anger, and ultimately the dissolution of the friendships.

“This idea of purity and you’re never compromised, and you’re always politically ‘woke’...you need to get over that quickly.”
– Barack Obama, 30 October 2019

Cancel Culture is Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is harassment occurring on digital platforms – social media, via text/SMS, online gaming, internet forums. This includes disseminating content or information intended to harm someone else and may be unlawful or criminal. The availability of access unfortunately means that strangers and acquaintances share the same risks as personal contacts.

This form of harassment either directly inflicts harm, or in the cases of cancel culture creates a semi-permanent public record of one’s “online reputation” (views, activity, behavior). Cancel culture creates a scenario for “doxing,” which is a form of online harassment used to destroy personal privacy and to

threaten/exact revenge against an individual by sharing sensitive information (social security numbers, credit card information) and personal information (addresses, phone numbers, websites, social media accounts).

Physical effects of bullying may include depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation and sadness, loss of interest, or change in sleep patterns and sleep deprivation. Bullying has a correlative relationship with enhancing unsupportive situations that may put some individuals at risk for violence, self-harm, or suicide.

“In 12 of 15 school shooting cases in the 1990s, the shooters had a history of being bullied.” (US Government, 2017)

Foundations like iSafe, the Cyberbullying Research Center, and safetyNETkids all conclude more than 50% of children will confront cyberbullying. Of that percentage, women will be twice as likely as men to be harassed. Cyberbullying will impact all races, sexes, and genders and victims will experience isolation and depression. The consensus seems to be that reporting occurs in approximately 10% of all cases, and fewer engage law enforcement.

Public Figures in Cancel Culture: Taylor Swift, Johnny Depp, Caroline Flack

In 2016, “#TaylorSwiftIsCanceled” played out as part of an online dispute with Kanye West. Swift described the sense of isolation in a 2019 interview with *Vogue*: “When you say someone is canceled, it’s not a TV show. It’s a human being and you’re sending mass amounts of messaging to this person to either shut them up, disappear, or it could also be perceived as, *kill yourself*,” adding, “A mass public shaming, with millions of people saying you are quote-unquote *canceled*, is a very isolating experience.” (Swift, 2019)

In the wake of being canceled, Swift faced a new backlash for not being able to “uncancel” herself long enough to endorse a presidential candidate in 2016, citing the same attacks leveraged against Hillary Clinton – that she was “calculated,” “manipulative,” and as a “liar.” She added, “Would I be an endorsement, or would I be a liability...many people were telling me to go disappear, so I disappeared.” (Swift, 2019)

Uncanceling is uncommon and it is unclear whether or not a person may uncancel themselves. A more prolific recent example of uncanceling occurs with Johnny Depp, who was accused by former partner Amber Heard of domestic violence in a *Washington Post* Op-Ed in 2016. Her accusations were later refuted by surveillance videos, neutral third parties, and law enforcement. Heard was subsequently identified on record, admitting domestic violence of her own.

The furor of misinformation and immediate cancellation of Johnny Depp led to a distancing by Disney. The company terminated Depp’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* contract four days after the publication of the Op-Ed. In Depp’s lawsuit, he claimed financial damages against Heard (their trial is pending), but the correlative impact of cancel culture cannot go unnoticed. The immediate social media backlash damaged Depp’s reputation – and Disney’s protection of its own image resulted in financial losses.

Loss is a constant in cancel culture and tragically, UK television star Caroline Flack was an emotional, and ultimately suicidal, victim. In 2011, at the age of 31, Flack began dating Harry Styles (aged 17 at the time). The backlash over their age gap grew and transformed into her being labeled a pedophile and pervert. This harassment was ongoing and intensified when she and companion Lewis Burton were involved in

an altercation in December 2019. Reportedly, Flack assaulted Burton with a table lamp (the full story and context is unclear). Online harassment was instant upon release of the story, and despite Burton withdrawing his complaint and criticizing the prosecution, a trial was scheduled. In February 2020, Flack was found hanged, her death ruled a suicide.

“Cancel Culture Is Not Real”

In an editorial for *Time*, author Sarah Hagi argues: “Cancel Culture isn’t real, at least not in the way people believe it is. Instead, it’s turned into a catch-all for when people in power face consequences for their action or receive any type of criticism, something that they’re not used to,” adding, “Those who condemn cancel culture usually imply that it’s unfair and indiscriminate.” (Hagi, 2019)

Hagi suggests cancel culture is not as effective as intended because of oversimplification and its application in too many contexts. In defense of the movement, she writes: “Rather than panicking that someone might be asked to take a seat, we would all do well to consider the people who are actually sidelined: people who lose opportunities because of toxic workplaces, who spend years dealing with trauma caused by other’s actions, who are made to feel unsafe.” (Hagi, 2019)

This concept of moral elitism fails greatly with demands for and implications of permanence. For example, Hagi is critical of and doubts Taylor Swift’s experience and expresses frustration with actor/comedian Louis CK booking comedy clubs nine months after admitting to sexual misconduct. The immediate reaction to his misconduct resulted in a separation from his talent agency and the termination of contracts with Netflix and HBO. In this sense, cancel culture was effective. The suggestion it was not seems disingenuous and cruel.

When permanence is the expected, commanded price, a foundation for tragedy is established. In the case of Caroline Flack, the harassment ended in suicide – leading one to wonder if this is the permanence sought. The true danger of cancel culture however lies beyond this expectation of perpetuity because of its insistence of guilt, many times without all relevant facts (ex. Johnny Depp-Amber Heard; Caroline Flack), and the rush to judgment and perceptive indictment.

The Duplicity of Cancel Culture

Hagi adds: “I write frequently about racism and Islamophobia and have received more death threats, calls for my firing and racist insults than I can keep track of. But when people who believe cancel culture is a problem speak out about its silencing effect, I know they’re not talking about those attacks...they’d prefer I was powerless against my own oppression.” (Hagi, 2019)

“Cancel Culture is a game, the point of which is to impose unemployment on people as a form of recreation.” – Kevin D. Williamson, June 13, 2020

In her final comments, the frustration Hagi expresses is understandable. Racism and Islamophobia, death threats and calls for termination are inexcusable. In cancel culture, this same targeted expression is the norm.

Consider the infamous cases of Kim Davis, the county clerk in Kentucky, who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples following the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision of 2015; Pamela Taylor and Mayor Beverly Whaling of West Virginia who referred to Michelle Obama as an “Ape

in Heels”; and even more recently Mark and Patricia McCloskey of Missouri, who brandished firearms at protesters trespassing on private property. The public response to each of these cases was widespread and swift, though some were as equally reprehensible as what Sarah Hagi described experiencing herself.

Kim Davis was found in contempt of court and jailed for five days, after which marriage certificates were issued (albeit redesigned to not feature her name). Pamela Taylor was removed from her position (and later indicted for federal fraud) and Mayor Beverly Whaling resigned. In each of these cases, the outcry led to actionable, semi-permanent solutions – accompanied by vitriol and threats of violence and death.

In the curious case of Mark and Patricia McCloskey, protesters gathered in the Central West End neighborhood of St. Louis to demand the resignation of Mayor Lyda Krewson. Following an unsuccessful attempt to meet with protesters supporting a movement to defund the police, Krewson hosted a Facebook Live event. In her broadcast she revealed the names and addresses of several protesters and was immediately accused of doxing and faced calls to resign.

On June 28, 2020, the group of protesters crossed a private property threshold, in an effort to reach Mayor Lyda Krewson’s home. Per videos and accounts of the event, Mark and Patricia McCloskey are seen instructing protesters to leave their property. The protesters refuse, the situation escalates, and guns are brought into the equation, resulting in the McCloskeys being doxed by protesters contesting the very same issue. Their identities and images, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails are widely disseminated. They become victims of online harassment and receive threats against their lives, properties, and pets. The Missouri Bar association is contacted with the intent to cause permanent, lasting damage.

Cancel Culture: Gain vs. Loss

In the case of the McCloskeys, or even the college freshman named D, in *The New York Times*’ exposé on cancel culture, the type of win-lose problem solving proposed by canceling a person carries risk.

“Although it’s easier to overlook the impact of a hostile approach at a virtual distance, remember that communication is irreversible.” (Adler, 2017)

There is a significant level of disinhibition and a lack of empathy when canceling another person. In order for one party to achieve their objective (to “win”), it must come at the expense of another (the one who stands to “lose”). Disinhibition thrives in the absence of face-to-face communication and may inspire aggressive tendencies. Win-lose communication is not commonly known as a justifiable form of resolution and is dangerous because of the wide variety of opinion.

Fundamentally, aggressive communication inspires defensiveness, which occurs when an individual counterattacks an attack. This does one of two things: (1) establishes an attack-and-defend pattern, which usually escalates conflict or (2) leads to stonewalling, which presents a refusal to engage and avoidance.

Take D from the *New York Times* piece for example. After making a series of homophobic comments, D realized his error and wrote an apology. He then apologized in person, face-to-face. The conditional and partial rejection of D’s sincerity led to his disengagement and avoidance. His former friends then lost their opportunity to engage in meaningful ways to shift perception and aid social growth.

The same situation happened with Mark and Patricia McCloskey. In interviews, Mark McCloskey claimed he feared for his life, and expressed a fear of violence from protesters, as justification for retrieving firearms. Repeated and continued online scrutiny, in addition to protester defense statements from neighbors, led Mark McCloskey to defend his position and suggest he would repeat his actions. Emerging threats of violence provided confirmation bias in a sense that McCloskey had already viewed trespassing protesters as violent.

In the instance of Kim Davis, she became a “religious freedom” martyr. Davis exercised her power unjustly to deny same-sex couples their legally earned right to marriage certificates. Upon release from jail, Davis traveled to Washington D.C. to see Pope Francis during a visit to the United States. Davis and her lawyer then packaged and sold a manipulated account of the meeting, in effort to reinforce her views and suggest Davis had been a victim of religious persecution. Kim Davis is *one* of many examples of cancel culture failing and doing more harm than good.

The presence of cancel culture provided Davis a national platform, name recognition, and a spotlight to empower “religious freedom” arguments against the “liberal agenda.” The end result of canceling Kim Davis was that yes, marriage certificates were ultimately offered – but she then found a platform to do inflict greater harm.

Cancel Culture Case Study

It is here *you* might consider your social media interactivity and online engagement. Have *you* witnessed an event or moment when a person has had a comment captured and shared? What have the reactions been? Do you notice in the comments that people have said they forwarded the screenshot to the person’s employer, family, and friends? Consider the gain versus loss in that moment.

Imagine John Smith from [insert small town near you] works locally. John’s spent his entire life in that community and will likely never leave. John holds, and expresses, racist views online. You, or someone you know attempts to cancel John by screenshotting his posts/comments and forwarding them to his family, friends, and employer. You request the employer terminate John.

One of two things occur:

- (1) The employer terminates John Smith – but John Smith has a family, a wife and three kids. Consider the impact of canceling John. John will now confront economic hardship along with his family. Canceling John may have achieved an immediate objective – but what does it accomplished long-term? Is John’s racist attitude changed – or will John have a confirmation bias? How will John’s family confront and react to the situation? Will they view John’s attitude as problematic, or will they develop a disposition toward racism because “social justice” caused them hardship?
- (2) The employer responds, declining to fire John, citing First Amendment protections, making the employer/company the new target of cancel culture.

Conclusions for Cancel Culture

Cancel Culture is a dangerous form of cyberbullying. As explored, cancel culture contributes to mental health decline, increased feelings of loneliness and isolation, depression, anxiety, and aggression. The impact of cyberbullying – and the desire for permanence – creates an atmosphere toward violence, both self-inflicted and external.

“If someone is more interested in seeing the subject of a call-out punished or shamed for their mistake, versus seeking to hold someone accountable for their problematic behavior and looking for a productive solution, it’s probably not the best idea to call someone out.” – Maisha Z. Johnson (Rodriguez-Cayro, 2018)

Cancel Culture creates scenarios for disengagement and avoidance, while increasing incidences of polarization, confirmation bias, forfeiture of access to attitudes, and may provide a greater platform for harm. Cancel culture as a form of intolerance poses as much risk as intolerance rooted in hate.

Canceling – or “calling out” – people establishes ineffective methods for communication, especially when face-to-face interaction is lacking. This increases reactivity and the likelihood of aggressive response and tension. Worse, the level of permanence is detrimental, and may not be rooted in fact (which could lead to legal troubles related to libel or slander).

Call-In Culture & Banks-Guevara

In June 2020, a “#SpeakingOut” movement raged on twitter. Several people detailed accounts of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse or misconduct in the professional wrestling industry. One performer, named Sammy Guevara, 26, was the victim of cancel culture after an audio recording from a podcast appearance in 2016 surfaced, in which he expressed a desire to “rape” wrestling superstar Sasha Banks, 28 (real name Mercedes Kaestner-Varnado).

The call for All Elite Wrestling to terminate Guevara’s contract was swift. The company reacted with an indefinite, unpaid suspension and a pledge to donate his contractual earnings to the Women’s Center of Jacksonville. As a condition of suspension, Guevara was ordered to complete sensitivity training, and was granted a meeting by Sasha Banks to apologize (via telephone).

“Earlier I spoke with Sammy, he apologized and we had an open discussion. Words like the comments he made, jokingly or not, have absolutely no place in our society! I don’t condone or tolerate this kind of behavior... We have to hold ourselves accountable for our actions and the words we say, and I hope this situation shows him that. I hope from this point on, in order for growth and change...we can continue to have these conversations...”

-Mercedes Varnado, June 22, 2020

The Banks-Guevara example reinforces the permanence-driven danger of cancel culture, whereas Varnado’s statement offers a look at the benefit of call-in culture. **Call-In Culture** is described as the instance in which an individual is gently told, or reminded, of their error. This is personal, direct contact and is considered less reactionary.

The directness of a call-in is more likely to succeed in terms of challenging an attitude, or ensuring a position is heard or considered. In these situations, listening and empathy are useful skills. Each aid understanding of a differing perspective or problematic attitude and provide an opportunity for careful, meaningful influence.

Speaking to a group of environmental activists at the World Economic Forum of 2019, Dr. Jane Goodall said: “How do you get through to these people? So often I see activists and they come face-to-face with a CEO or somebody and they immediately become very aggressive,” adding, “the person that they’re attacking is immediately defensive. They’re immediately thinking how can I respond to this? How can I deal with this person?”

Dr. Goodall concluded: “It’s no good when you meet somebody like that who’s dedicated to their path, which may be a destructive path. It’s no good trying to get to the brain...what you have to do is to get into the heart. And how do you get into the heart? With stories.” (Goodall, 2019)

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