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Why we can't stop fighting about cancel culture

Is cancel culture a mob mentality, or a long overdue way of speaking truth to power?

By Aja Romano | @ajaromano | Dec 30, 2019, 12:40pm EST

One of the odder ideas to snowball its way into the zeitgeist during the decade's turbulent second half is the idea that a person can be “canceled” — in other words, culturally blocked from having a prominent public platform or career.

Within the past five years, the rise of “cancel culture” and the idea of canceling someone have become polarizing topics of debate as a familiar pattern has emerged: A celebrity or other public figure does or says something offensive. A public backlash, often fueled by politically progressive social media, ensues. Then come the calls to cancel the person —

that is, to effectively end their career or revoke their cultural cachet, whether through boycotts of their work or disciplinary action from an employer.

In 2019 alone, the list of people who've faced being canceled included alleged sexual predators like **R. Kelly**; entertainers like **Kanye West**, **Scarlett Johansson**, and **Gina Rodriguez**, who all had offensive foot-in-mouth moments; and comedians like **Kevin Hart** and Shane Gillis, who each faced public backlash after social media users unearthed **homophobic** and **racist** jokes they'd made in the past.

But actually ending someone's career through the power of public backlash is easier said than done. Few entertainers have truly been canceled — that is, they haven't had their careers totally shut down by negative criticism on the internet. For example, in 2019, **Hart withdrew himself** from hosting the Oscars, but **his movies** and **stand-up specials** were still successful after the backlash against him died down. Gillis was swiftly **dropped from the cast of *Saturday Night Live*** over his offensive humor, but he's since been **greeted warmly** by crowds at comedy shows, **defended** by fellow comedians like Ricky Gervais and David Spade, and **invited for a heart to heart** with Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang — turning his use of racial slurs into a teachable moment.

And though many of the most prominent examples of cancellation have **arrived in the Me Too era**, most of the men who have faced accusations have also dodged long-term consequences. After multiple women came forward with allegations of sexual misconduct against him in 2017, **Louis C.K.'s** career hiatus lasted only **around 10 months** before he returned to stand-up comedy and performed **dozens of sold-out, controversial** shows. After high-profile documentaries exploring allegations of decades of sexual assault against each of them were released earlier this year, both R. Kelly and the late Michael Jackson saw **increases in streams of their music**, rather than decreases.

Continued support for those who have been canceled demonstrates that instead of costing someone their careers, attempting to cancel someone can encourage sympathy for the offender. Yet to hear Gillis and **many others** talk about cancel culture, you might think it's some sort of "**celebrity hunting season**" — an unstoppable force descending to ruin the careers of anyone who dares to push society's moral boundaries. This framing frequently portrays the offender as the victim of reckless vigilante justice.

"There are very few people that have gone through what they have, losing everything in a day," **comedian Norm MacDonald said in a 2018 interview**, referring to canceled

comedians like C.K. and **Roseanne Barr**. “Of course, people will go, ‘What about the victims?’ But you know what? The victims didn’t have to go through that.”

So which is it? Is cancel culture an important tool of social justice or a new form of merciless mob intimidation? If canceling someone usually doesn’t work, does cancel culture even exist? Or does the very idea of being canceled work to deter potentially bad behavior?

These questions have received more and more mainstream consideration over the past few years, as the idea of cancel culture itself has evolved from its humorous origins into a broader and more serious conversation about how to hold public figures accountable for bad behavior. And the conversation isn’t just about when and how public figures should lose their status and their livelihoods. It’s also about establishing new ethical and social norms and figuring out how to collectively respond when those norms are violated.

“Canceling” came out of the unlikeliest place: a misogynistic joke

Given how frequently it’s been used to repudiate sexism and misogyny, it’s ironic that the concept of “canceling” shares its DNA with a misogynistic joke. Possibly the first reference to canceling someone comes with the 1991 film *New Jack City*, in which Wesley Snipes plays a gangster named Nino Brown. **In one scene**, after his girlfriend breaks down because of all the violence he’s causing, he dumps her by saying, “Cancel that bitch. I’ll buy another one.” (We owe this witticism to screenwriter **Thomas Lee Wright**.)

Jump to 2010, when Lil Wayne referenced the film in a line from his song “**I’m Single**”: “Yeah, I’m single / n***a had to cancel that bitch like Nino.” This callback to the earlier sexist cancel joke probably helped the phrase percolate for a while.

But canceling seems to have gotten its first big boost into the zeitgeist from an episode of VH1’s reality show *Love and Hip-Hop: New York* that aired in December 2014, in which cast member Cisco Rosado tells his love interest Diamond Strawberry during a fight, “**you’re canceled**.” Even with zero context, it’s a hilarious moment:

The quote began to appear on social media shortly after the episode aired.



Scotty 🗣️
@scotty2thotty_

ima start telling people "you're canceled, out my face" 😂😂💀

1 9:47 PM - Dec 22, 2014

[See Scotty 🗺️'s other Tweets](#)



Makaela

@U_NeedMoore

You're canceled. Nah I don't think that's gone catch on

2 9:48 PM - Dec 22, 2014

[See Makaela's other Tweets](#)

From there, the idea of canceling began to disseminate from **Black Twitter** throughout 2015, used as a reaction to someone doing something you disapproved of — either jokingly or seriously.



Jess 🦋

@jessstar4

Meg loves orange. She's cancelled 🧑🏻

1:59 PM - Oct 21, 2015

[See Jess 🦋's other Tweets](#)

If you aren't giving positive vibes, you're canceled out from my life. Simple.

— Hales (@hales_800) May 10, 2015

As it caught on, however, the term began to evolve into a way of responding not just to friends or acquaintances, but also to celebrities or entities whose behavior offended you.



Polly Gray.

@cozetteclegane

Ed is canceled and deleted. [twitter.com/BuzzFeedUK/sta...](https://twitter.com/BuzzFeedUK/status/62879720)

BuzzFeed UK @BuzzFeedUK

Ed Sheeran said Nicki Minaj's VMAs race argument is "redundant" [buzzfeed.com/elliewoodward/...](https://www.buzzfeed.com/elliewoodward/)



10 7:02 AM - Jul 23, 2015

[20 people are talking about this](#)



gooch licka
@TAYLOR_MR

So like, she's cancelled

amy schumer rape jokes x 🔍

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Amy Schumer Scored A Standing Ovation For A Rape Joke (And ...
[junkee.com > amy-schumer-scored-a-sta...](https://www.junkee.com/amy-schumer-scored-a-sta...)

Mobile-friendly - Within five minutes of **Amy Schumer's** only Australian stand-up show, I feel like an asshole. Having just come off three ...

Amv Schumer Anoloizes for "Racist"

1 3:33 AM - Dec 30, 2015

She referred to the same shtick of playing an "irreverent idiot" that makes "dumb jokes involving race."

"I enjoy playing the girl who time to time says the dumbest thing possible, and playing with race is a thing we are not supposed to do, which is what makes it so fun for comics," she said.

The Guardian pointed to her consensual Hispanic joke, as well as a joke she made about "crazy" Latina women while hosting the MTV Movie Awards in April.

[See gooch licka's other Tweets](#)

And even early on, canceling someone often involved boycotting them professionally, as the tweets below demonstrate:

Arnesa.
@arrnesa_xx



Ok you're cancelled like shit *deletes all memes of you from my camera roll* [twitter.com/stephenasmith/...](https://twitter.com/stephenasmith/)

Stephen A Smith @stephenasmith

Where is all the noise about #BlackLivesMatter when black folks are killing black folks?

8:33 PM - Jul 23, 2015

[See Arnesa.'s other Tweets](#)



Mimi Jane
@mads4pres

Travis Scott is homophobic trash. His music is cancelled... He's cancelled guys!! If u still like him plz unfollow me

11:20 AM - Sep 7, 2015

[See Mimi Jane's other Tweets](#)



malek
@offlinemalek

I was blasting fade by kanye and then I remembered he's cancelled and changed

71 12:18 AM - Dec 15, 2016

[19 people are talking about this](#)

Even though these early examples are largely independent and distinct from one another, they contained the seeds of what cancel culture would become: a trend of communal calls to boycott a celebrity whose offensive behavior is perceived as going too far.

It's common to compare cancel culture to “call-out culture” — but its real roots may lie in the civil rights movement

As cancel culture caught on, many members of the public, as well as the media, have frequently **conflated it** with other adjacent trends — especially “call-out culture.” Cancel culture can be seen as an extension of call-out culture: the natural escalation from pointing out a problem to calling for the head of the person who caused it.

Cancel culture and call-out culture are often confused not only with each other, but also with broader public shaming trends, as part of a collectivized narrative that all of these things are examples of trolling and harassment. The media sometimes refers to this idea as “outrage culture.”

But while these ideas seem interchangeable at a glance, they’re different in important ways. Call-out culture predates cancel culture as a concept, with online roots in early 2010s Tumblr fandom callout blogs, like **Your Fave is Problematic**, and **spreading** from there. Call-out culture is a term that arose within fandom, used by fans of all kinds deploying criticism of pop culture or public figures, in inherent opposition to toxic online harassment mobs like **Gamergate**. Meanwhile, cancel culture arose within black culture and appears to channel black empowerment movements as far back as the **civil rights boycotts of the 1950s and ’60s**.

“While the terminology of cancel culture may be new and most applicable to social media through Black Twitter, in particular, the concept of being canceled is not new to black culture,” Anne Charity Hudley, the chair of linguistics of African America for the University of California Santa Barbara, told Vox. Hudley, who studies black vernacular and the use of language in cultural conversations like this one, described canceling as “a survival skill as old as the Southern black use of the boycott.”

Charity Hudley pointed out that canceling someone is akin to a boycott, but of a person rather than a business. What’s more, it promotes the idea that black people should be empowered to reject the parts of pop culture that spread harmful ideas. “If you don’t have the ability to stop something through political means, what you can do is refuse to participate,” she said.

Thanks to social media, black culture in particular has become more widely recognized as the dominant driving force behind much of pop culture. Platforms like Twitter give a louder collective voice to black citizens and other marginalized groups who have traditionally been shunted to the edges of public conversations, while platforms like YouTube and Netflix **help to diversify** and **expand** the types of media and pop culture we consume. And in a society where cultural participation is increasingly democratized, the refusal to participate also becomes more important.

“Canceling is a way to acknowledge that you don’t have to have the power to change structural inequality,” Charity Hudley said. “You don’t even have to have the power to

change all of public sentiment. But as an individual, you can still have power beyond measure.

“When you see people canceling Kanye, canceling other people, it’s a collective way of saying, ‘We elevated your social status, your economic prowess, [and] we’re not going to pay attention to you in the way that we once did. ... ‘I may have no power, but the power I have is to [ignore] you.’”

Cancel culture, then, serves as a pop culture corrective for the sense of powerlessness that many people feel. But as it’s gained mainstream attention, cancel culture has also seemed to gain a more material power — at least in the eyes of the many people who’d like to, well, cancel it.

Very few canceled celebs actually suffer career setbacks. But witnessing cancel culture backlash seems to send some people into panic mode.

Some celebrities, whose crimes have encompassed allegations of rape and sexual assault and became impossible to ignore, like **Harvey Weinstein**, **Bill Cosby**, and **Kevin Spacey**, have effectively been canceled. Along with Roseanne Barr, who lost her hit TV show after a **racist tweet**, their offenses were serious enough to irreparably damage their careers, alongside a push to lessen their cultural influence. And though it’s still early for author J.K. Rowling, her very **recent transphobic tweet** was so upsetting to Harry Potter fans that large segments of the fandom started openly claiming that Rowling wasn’t the author of their beloved series at all; she was **no longer part of the equation**.

Rowling hasn’t responded to the outrage that fans of Harry Potter have expressed over her transphobic stance, but the level of publicity it has received has been damning. And tellingly, as of late December, Rowling has not returned to Twitter since the initial offending tweet. It’s impossible to truly ignore public scorn at the level that Rowling received. And therein lies cancel culture at its most powerful.

“I think it’s clear that a ‘cancel’ campaign is more effective if there is significant embarrassment [involved],” Catherine Squires, author of *The Post-racial Mystique* and a professor of communication studies at the University of Minnesota, told Vox in an email.

With that potential embarrassment, however, comes a high degree of alarm. A **recent piece in Digiday** about cancel culture’s effect on brands and businesses framed it as “mob rule,” with one anonymous PR executive declaring, “even good intentions get canceled.” In September, **the New Republic’s Osita Nwanevu observed** just how frequently media

outlets have compared cancel culture to violent political uprisings, ranging from ethnocide to torture under dictatorial regimes.

This hyperbole might feel reasonable to someone faced with a social justice mob, but to proponents of cancel culture, it seems more like a disingenuous slippery slope that really only works to marginalize victims. For example: In 2018, feminist performance artist Emma Sulkowicz **designed a protest performance** in response to a **New York Times article**. The article, as she later **explained to Teen Vogue**, had asked museum directors if they would remove works by famed artist Chuck Close from their galleries, after Close was **accused by multiple women of sexual harassment**.

“I got so upset that survivors’ voices weren’t included in the conversation,” Sulkowicz said. “One museum director was like, ‘If we go down this road, our museum walls will be bare.’ And I thought, ‘Do you only show work by evil men?’”

The debate around cancel culture is partly about how we treat each other, and partly about frustration with the lack of real consequences for powerful people

All of this dramatic rhetoric from both sides of the debate shows how incendiary cancel culture has become. As ideological divides seem more and more insurmountable, the line between the personal and the political is vanishing for many people. Even though cancel culture seems to generate few lasting consequences for celebrities and their careers, some people seem to view it as part of a broader trend they find deeply disturbing: an inability to forgive and move on.

Aaron Rose, a corporate diversity and inclusion consultant, used to identify with progressives who participate in call-out and cancel culture. But now, he says, he’s focused on objectives like “conflict transformation,” motivated by the question of “how do we truly communicate [and] treat each other like humans?”

“Mainstream internet activism is a lot of calling out and blaming and shaming,” he told Vox in an email. “We have to get honest with ourselves about whether calling out and canceling gives us more than a short-term release of cathartic anger.”

Rose “used to think that those tactics created change,” he said, but eventually realized “that I was not seeing the true change I desired. ... We were still sad and mad. And the bad people were still bad. And everyone was still traumatized.” He says he now wants to “create more stories of transformation rather than stories of punishment and excommunication.”

Loretta Ross is a self-identified liberal who's come to hold a similar position. In **an opinion piece** for the New York Times, she wrote that as a black feminist, she finds cancel and call-out culture a "toxic" practice wherein "people attempt to expunge anyone with whom they do not perfectly agree, rather than remain focused on those who profit from discrimination and injustice."

In Ross's view, "most public shaming is horizontal" — that is, it's not done to justifiably criticize people who are seriously dangerous, but to score brownie points against people who mean no harm. The people doing the canceling, she argues, "become the self-appointed guardians of political purity."

But among proponents of canceling is a sense that any losses that the canceled person suffers are outweighed by a greater cultural need to change the behavior they're embodying. "Forgive me if I care less about the comedian who made his own bed versus the people affected by the anti-queer climate he helped create," **wrote** Esquire's Michael Arceneaux in response to Hart's homophobic comments in 2018.

"[W]hat people do when they invoke dog whistles like 'cancel culture' and 'culture wars,'" Danielle Butler **wrote** for the Root in 2018, "is illustrate their discomfort with the kinds of people who now have a voice and their audacity to direct it towards figures with more visibility and power."

But to progressives like Rose, rejecting cancel culture doesn't have to mean rejecting the principles of social justice and the push for equality that fuels it. "This does not mean repressing our reactions or giving up on accountability," he told Vox. "On the contrary, it means giving ourselves the space to truly honor our feelings of sadness and anger, while also not reacting in a way that implies that others are ... incapable of compassion and change."

To Rose, and for many opponents of cancel culture, the bottom line in the debate is a need to believe that other people can change, and treat them with according optimism. The difference between cancel culture and a more reconciliatory, transformational approach to a disagreement is "the difference between expecting amends and never letting a wound close," he said. "Between expressing your rage and identifying with it forever."

"I get that, but that's a really middle-class, white privilege way of coming at this," Charity Hudley countered when I summarized Rose's viewpoint for her. "From my point of view, for

black culture and cultures of people who are lower income and disenfranchised, this is the first time you *do* have a voice in those types of conversations.”

Charity Hudley’s point highlights what seems to many to be the bottom line in the conversation around cancel culture: For those who are doing the calling out or the canceling, the odds are still stacked against them. They’re still the ones without the social, political, or professional power to compel someone into meaningful atonement, to do much more than organize a collective boycott.

“I think that’s why people see [cancel culture] as a threat, or furthering the divide,” she said. “The divide was already there.”

As we head into a new decade, that divide seems to be widening and growing more visible. And it isn’t purely a divide between ideologies, but also between tactical approaches in navigating those ideological differences and dealing with wrongdoing. The view that a traditional approach — apology, atonement, and forgiveness — is no longer enough might be startling. But to those who think of cancel culture as an extension of civil rights activists’ push for meaningful change, it’s an important tool. And it’s clear that, controversial as cancel culture is, it is here to stay.

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