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Understanding cancel culture: Normative and unequal sanctioning

by Hervé Saint-Louis

Abstract

Cancel culture is a phenomenon where individuals transgressing norms are called out and ostracised on social media and other venues by members of the public. While its effects are decried by some and its existence denied by others, the processes that shape cancel culture are misunderstood. In this article, I argue that cancellation can only occur if participating third parties with oversight over transgressing individuals perform sanctions. Furthermore, I explore how cancel culture affects people unequally by looking at the phenomenon known as the Karens. Using social normative theories, I evaluate how women affected by cancellation are facing misogyny through cancel culture.

Contents

Introduction

In a June 2020 blog post where she spoke out on sex and gender issues, *Harry Potter's* creator J.K. Rowling (2020) affirmed that her controversial position had probably led her to be cancelled four of five times already. Unlike most people affected by cancellation and cancel culture, Rowling seemed at peace, defiant and unfazed by people's reaction to her position and the effects of having been cancelled on her personal and professional life. Such is not the case for all cancelled individuals. On 6 July 2020, a Florida resident refusing to wear a mask in a Cosco was asked by customers to wear one. In response, the man shouted "I feel threatened" and moved forcefully towards the customers. A video of the interaction was reposted to Twitter by local celebrity Billy Corben (2020) at 10:48 PM. The next day, less than 24 hours later, the man's identity had been revealed on Twitter (Loder, 2020) and his employer Ted Todd Insurance (2020) and company executive Charley Todd (2020) announced that Daniel Maples had been fired. In current vernacular, Maples had been cancelled.

Cancel culture is the label used to describe individuals like Maples whom the public ostracise on social media and other venues, leading to sanctions affecting their professional and personal lives. Cancel culture is seen as a scourge against the freedom of expression, and a retribution approach (known as a call-out) (Bérubé, 2018) that can destroy lives when activists push for the cancellation of individuals (*Harper's*, 2020). Yet, it is my contention that complaints against cancel culture and denials about its existence tend to ignore the processes that lead to cancellation, the active proponent in cancel culture. Activists do not fire transgressing individuals. Organisations, such as employers, boards or directors, and state authorities are the only one who can sanction an individual.

In this article, I argue that cancellation that third parties oversight over individuals, such as employers, advertisers, licensors, enforcement agents, other state authorities, or even business partners are the ones who respond to call-outs

by the public. By cancellation, I mean to remove an individual from a position, from a place, such as a corporate appointment or a job. These overseers respond to the ostracisation of individuals and perform the ultimate cancellation of the person.

My second argument in this article is that cancel culture and cancellation are unequal. In a letter to *Harper's* (2020), signatories that include Margaret Atwood, Noam Chomsky, Malcolm Gladwell, J.K. Rowling, and Salman Rushdie focused on the degradation on freedom of expression caused by cancel culture. Freedom of expression is only one aspect affected by cancel culture. Cancel culture has lasting consequences for afflicted individuals caused by initial defamatory exposure that include being fired, public shaming, public sharing of personal information that often leads to ostracisation. Cancellation does not affect all transgressing individuals equally. In the latter part of this article, I explore how women are affected by cancel culture by exploring the phenomenon known as Karens. Karens are women ostracised by cancel culture. I maintain that the effects of cancellation on women are dire.

The theoretical approach favoured in analysing cancel culture here is on based normative social theory. Normative social theory explores how norms are brought about, with some arguing that individuals shape norms while others arbour holistic positions (Zafirovski, 2000). Through normative social theory, I evaluate how cancel culture and cancellation are phenomena that pit social and moral norms against transgressing individuals. However, their enforcement against transgressing individuals is limited and reliant on legal and sanctioning norms that escape the purview of "cancellers." Hence, cancellation is enacted through the agency of third parties, mainly organisations that enforce predicated social and moral norms.

Approaches based on freedom of speech and defamation (*Harper's*, 2020) when attempting to understand cancel culture and cancellation do not consider the ever-changing normative space engineered through social media and related public sphere spaces. They offer prescriptive perspectives that cannot explain the norm-shaping processes that make cancel culture appealing to a segment of the public. Using freedom of expression and defamatory approaches to understand cancel culture is in itself a normative prescription that condemns activists and parts of the public who react to perceived normative transgressions by ostracisation. This ostracisation is necessary to bring about enforcement (cancellation) by overseeing third parties.

Following a brief literature review pertaining to phenomena related to cancel culture, I explore the historical appearance of the term and the perceived novelty of the phenomenon as part of a continuing redefinition of public discourse through online means that relates to several new terms such a "woke," "incel," "snowflake," "virtue signalling," and "gaslighting." The aim of this article is to provide a preliminary understanding and definition of cancel culture that highlights how the process of cancellation demonstrating how it is not a novel phenomenon but an extension of older forms of public discourse and responses to such discourses adapted for the current social media landscape.

Limitations in this research include the nascent and evolving nature of cancel culture discourse. As I was completing the first draft of this article, the *Harper's* signatories released their letter of condemnation on cancel culture. This article is a snapshot of a shifting space in the public sphere discourse. A second limitation is the overtly qualitative nature of this study. My intent in this article was to map out the history of the term cancel culture and explore the discourse on Karens. At this stage, this study is not an empirical investigation using social network analyses to understand how call-outs and cancellation operate on network levels.

Literature review

As of this writing, the literature directly tackling cancel culture is not formed. Yet, phenomena related to online shaming are not new. Laidlaw (2017) defining online shaming as social control (Posner, 2015), observes the consequences of this practice on privacy. Evaluating vigilantism, bullying, bigotry, and gossiping, she explains how these practices shame individuals involved in both legal/criminal activities as well as others shamed in response to benign norm breaking (Laidlaw, 2017). Consequences with legal implication for privacy are the perpetual informational residue of the acts and identity that led to the shaming in Web documents such as tweets or search engine results. These, Laidlaw (2017) argues, may affect human dignity, which is an important tenet of privacy. An important contribution from Laidlaw is her description of vigilantism as actions by a mob against an individual that leads to lasting effects. In my perspective on cancel culture, as argued above the mob justice/vigilantism aspect is what leads to cancellation. Cancellation, I argue, is performed by organisations that disassociate themselves from shamed individuals.

George and Leidner (2019) offer a framework to understand forms of digital activism. Inspired by Milbrath's (1965) hierarchy of political participation, the authors produce a taxonomy of digital activism organising actions performed

through information and communication technologies (ICT) that include practices such as clicktivism, metavoicing, e-funding, exposure and hacktivism. An interesting quirk of this hierarchy is that several common practices associated to cancel culture are ranked in different ranges of digital actions. For example, clicktivism which is the act of liking, upvoting a message, or following an account on social media, and metavoicing, which involves sharing, retweeting, reposting, or commenting a post are both considered digital spectator activities (George and Leidner, 2019). Based on the taxonomy, these have the least political involvement from social media users. However, political consumerism, which involves people aligning their consumption with their political ideologies (George and Leidner, 2019), is a form of boycott that is frequently used during cancellation. The authors rank this practice in the middle class known as digital transitional activities. These activities, they reason, require greater involvement from respondents but also yield greater results. Finally, the authors rank exposure, which involves the sharing of unauthorised or private data, as a digital gladiatorial activity (George and Leidner, 2019). As such, respondents' involvement in a digital activist action is categorised as the highest. Perhaps a flaw of this model is Milbrath's individualistic framework which influenced George and Leidner's hierarchy. The authors do not account for group actions or even presuppose that communities of practices are involved in political actions. It favours the agency of the lone social media user by not considering networks effects and dynamic structures in cancel culture.

Tucker (2018) warns about the problematic surveillance aspect of call-out culture using Mathiesen's (1997) concept of synopticon, defined as the surveillance of the few by the many. She argues that celebrities' words and actions are policed and compared to an ideal held by the public. Tucker (2018) writes that when these values, words, or actions of celebrities no longer adhere with that of segments of the public that they are call-out by the media and social media users.

Writing about the challenges of the #MeToo movement, Zarkov and Davis (2018) tackle the perspective of celebrity culture and how the media help propagate online shaming and exposure. They mention that one of the most apparent perspectives of the #MeToo movement is the focus on visible and powerful men denounced by equally illustrious women that did not represent the everyday lives of sexual aggressors and victims of sexual aggressions (Zarkov and Davis, 2018). They equate public shaming and blaming in movements such as #MeToo to the moralising denunciations of the 1950s where attacks on women were attacks on morality and decency. An important argument that the authors make is that power structures may cancel some men that are no longer salvageable after serious norm-breaking (Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey) but that others (like Donald Trump) are not and too "big" to fall (Zarkov and Davis, 2018). This argument introduces is similar to the argument that I develop below on who exactly performs cancellation of norm-breaking individuals.

Researchers have explored the legal aspect of consequences to the #MeToo movement in terms of employer responsibility (Tippett, 2018), and restorative justice for activists and due process for those accused of impropriety (Wexler, *et al.*, 2019). However, Croeser (2016) has touched upon an important consideration that is the entangled and conflicting space related to freedom of expression and the response to online harassment. She argues that traditional perspective of freedom of expression, drawing from liberalism and *laissez faire* ideals about the better ideas rising to the top are misleading and not helpful for traditionally marginalised communities (Croeser, 2016). Similarly, using #GamerGates as one example, Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2015) maintain that online networks are patriarchal and reinforce misogyny and attacks against racialised individuals. In my consideration of cancel culture, as argued above, I consider Croeser, Banet-Weiser, and Miltner remind us that cancellation is not a practice exclusive to specific political ideologies and positions.

Cancellation is different from online consumer reviews (Lim and Van Der Heide, 2015) where individuals review products and services provided by organisations, such as restaurants, merchants, and services or by professionals such as physicians, university instructors, or plumbers on platforms such as Yelp, RateMDs, RateMyProfessors, or sitejabber. Online consumer review platforms focus reputation aggregations but not directly on normative transgressions in people's social lives. While they can be used to propagate false information (Luca and Zervas, 2016), or start boycott measures against an organisation or an individual, they mediate information about public practices maintain roles and public functions in society. Most importantly, online consumer reviewers seek to inform other consumers and not push sanctioning organisations to cancel other organisations and individuals.

However, as Benkler (2006) observed, peer-based rankings of comments in crowdsourced-moderation systems can elevate, filter, and determine the normative worth of a post on a platform. These early peer-based moderation systems have normative attributes that people use to upvote or downvote messages. Peer-based moderation and ranking systems rely upon the labour of users (Benkler, 2006) but more so in cancel culture and cancellation, it unpaid work often performed by less privileged groups (Nakamura, 2015; Vemuri, 2018).

The social theory of norms

Above, I have argued that cancellation is a practice used mainly in social media but also in other contexts to sanction norm-breaking behaviour. I have also argued that third parties that have oversight over individuals perform the sanctioning norm-breaking behaviour. Cancellation and cancel culture are active grounds for debates about the construction of norms in social media and beyond, in the wider information economy. The use of the term norm, a basic tenet of sociology (Spencer, 1970) is more than about convention breaking. For example, on Twitter following a user that just followed one is not a widespread convention. Not following the user back is not a transgression that can lead to ostracisation. Social norms and moral norms (mores) are the two types of norms of interest when evaluating cancel culture.

As Elster (1989) reminds us, social norms should be differentiated from habits, legal norms, and moral norms. Social norms are prescriptions that people use in any given situation that are agreed upon by significant segments of a group (Elster, 1989). Community members enforce social norms not out of self-interest nor out of self-preservation, nor in responses to ethical consequences (Elster, 1989). Social media users who are part of social networks of people on platforms respond to norm-breaking behaviour by calling them out to enforce what they believe are established, or should be established conventions. These conventions may not have gelled as can frequently be seen in social media. For example, although widespread, the practice of following back a new follower on Twitter is not a convention systematically practised by all users. There is an element of performative persuasion involved in callingout an individual's transgressive behaviour as we will explore further below.

Mores are norms with consequences (rewards or punishments) based on the approval or disapproval of others (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Sending a slur to another Facebook user can lead to the termination of a post, the cancellation of an account, or to being blocked by the victim. Mores also involve a degree of empathy with an afflicted person, preventing transgressions against the other (Arrow, 1970). When using moral norms to enforce compliance and denounce deviance, social media users draw on pathos more so than ethos. Hence, moral norms vie for preponderance against social norms when cancellation is at play on social media.

One of the challenges to understanding cancel culture as a phenomenon has been the confluence of social norms against moral norm enforcement. For example, when a social media user posts a video of an assault performed by one individual against another, as in the George Floyd case, this user draws on moral norms to indict the exposed person whose behaviour is problematic. Whereas denouncing a user trolling another one on social media or posting disagreeable posts, is the realm of social norms being established in an ever-changing social network. While both types of denouncers seek to generate social network effects, in the trolling denouncement scenario, there is an attempt at social influencing a public through communicative means (Knight Lapinski and Rimal, 2005).

Elster (1989) maintains that social norms and their enforcements are not entirely structural as they involve the agency of individuals. However, as Castells (2012) reminds us, social movement often spring up due to a crisis of legitimacy, which creates networks that are both local and global. While political and cultural reforms (Castells, 2012) may be the goal of movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, they before they can enact change, they must first react to ongoing situations and events. Terranova (2004) observes that while global forces push homogenising features onto networks that similarly, localised and virtually based networks push back and inform culture with its own messages and concerns. I contend that the changes desired by cancellers are in response to a perception of gaps in legal norms and the power of authorities leading to runaway cancellation attempts to catch the attention of the public, but also of third parties and authorities that have oversights over transgressing individuals.

Cultural terminology

While I argue that cancellation should be understood as an act where an organisation shuns an individual it is associated with, as opposed to regarding cancellation as a form of mob justice, cancel culture is one of many terms used social media users in English-speaking cultures to describe what appears to be a new phenomenon. I contend that this phenomenon is not new while related to call-out culture, doxing, and parallel to deplatforming. Call-out culture refers to the mediation and exchanges between parties (Sills, *et al.*, 2016) where one will denounce or call attention to contents and behaviour published by another party. I will return to the relationship between call-out culture and cancel culture below. Doxing is a practice where personal information about a person is released on the Web to cause harm (Douglas, 2016). Doxing is one of the practices involved in cancel culture. Deplatforming is a platform's removal of an individual or a group's social media account following an infraction to the former's terms of services (Rogers, 2020).

Like call-out culture, doxing and deplatforming, cancel culture's origin stems from many online and off-line forms of public discourse in the public sphere. Cancel culture refers to the cancellation of individuals through online denunciations which results in the ostracisation and shaming of people. Specifically, I explain the act of cancellation

(or cancelling), the active element of cancel culture, as an event where organisations censor, fire, or encourage celebrities or commoners to resign following a breach of social norms, mores, and taboos.

Cancellation is a term people use in public sphere discussions on social media as a definition of a phenomenon where groups call for the ostracisation of individuals who break social norms, mores, and taboos. It is one of many terms people use as a definition to denote phenomena in social media-based discursive practices. These definitions are also labels used by some to tag opponents in debates. While proponents may use the term cancellation and close variations, and forms like “to cancel”, and “cancelling” as acts against norm-breaking individuals, critics have used cancel culture as a description and criticism of the practice.

Pundits and critics reuse terms such as cancellation redirect them as attacks against opposing groups and individuals. Responders use terms such as “antifa,” which signifies antifascism or “SJW” for social justice warriors to criticise and label opposing factions that they disagree with. I argue that this process of labelling and criticism happens across an ideological spectrum with some terms favoured by some people aligned with some political persuasions. For example, antifa, which initially was a shorthand, when used by some conservatives in the United States, has morphed into the appellation of a whole group of people and even a terrorist designation (Zapotosky, *et al.*, 2020).

Similarly, people of certain political persuasions use specific terms over others. Other conservatives add the epithet warrior to the term social justice reclaiming it from left-leaning proponents. SJW transforms into a slur against champions of social justice. Even when factions use labels against specific opposing groups or individuals, others readily understand this changing meaning, allowing the term to gain cross-ideological spectrum recognition even if meanings differ.

Romano (2020) traces the use of the term cancellation to the 1991 American film *New Jack City* where a character uses the term to cancel a girlfriend in lieu of the term dumping or breaking up. Thus, in its inception cancellation was about dumping and erasing another person from one’s life and personal space, much like cancelling a magazine or an order from a restaurant. Cancellation in this sense meant a removal of commitment from another entity such as a person, a pet, a service, or an object. Here, there is subjectivity at play where an individual decides that an entity can no longer remain in one’s life, take resources, time, or warrant attention.

According to Romano (2020), the term cancelling spread in 2010 when artist-composer Lil Wayne (2009) referred to a line in the film *New Jack City* (Jackson and McHenry, 1991) where a character mentions that he cancelled his girlfriend. In both instances, cancelling meant to dump a girlfriend. Cancelling gained traction once in December 2014 when it was used again in popular culture. In the reality television show *Love and Hip-Hop: New York* (Rosado, 2014), a male actor tells his girlfriend that she is cancelled during a fight. Cancellation was used by Black Twitter user @scotty2thotty_ (Scotty, 2014) denoting interest in using the expression to signify that he had broken up or removed a person from his life.

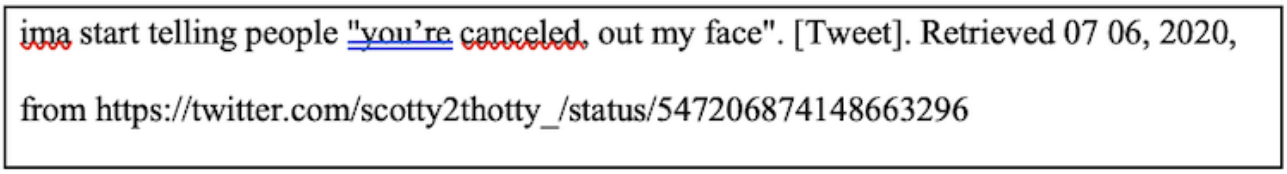

Figure 1: Scotty. [@scotty2thotty_]. (2014, 22 December).

Other users started to use the expression in 2015 in personal context but also about public figures.

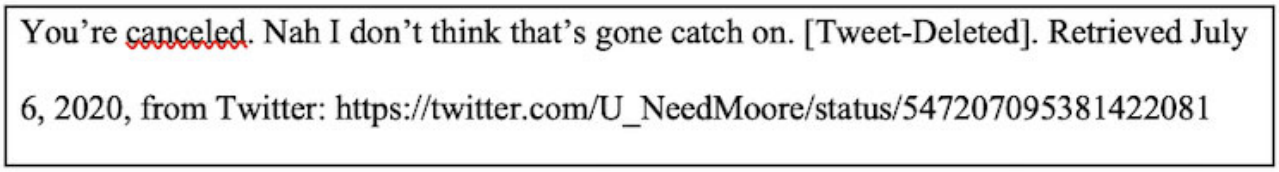

Figure 2: E. Em., &. [U_NeedMoore]. (2014, 23 December).

In @ U_NeedMoore's since deleted tweet, she responded to @scotty2thotty_ proverbial claim that the expression to cancel would gain traction. It is important to observe that Black Twitter initiated the expression to cancel. Black Twitter often initiates novel expressions and cultural signs that other groups later adopt (Florini, 2013; T. Jones, 2015; Sharma, 2013).

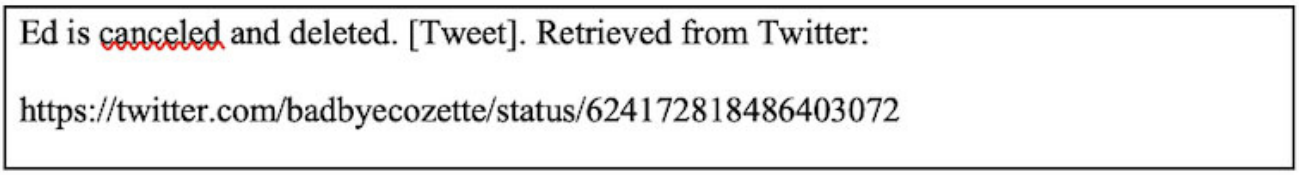

Figure 3: P. Gray., [badbyecozette]. (2015, 23 July).

Here, @badbyecozette started using the term cancelled in conjunction with the term deleted to express her disagreement with comments expressed by British composer Ed Sheeran. The user was commenting on a public dispute between Sheeran, and signers Nicki Minaj and Taylor Swift. Here, to cancel was used to comment on a non-personal affair but also as a way signify her personal agency in a very limited proposal to ostracise a public figure not in her personal network.

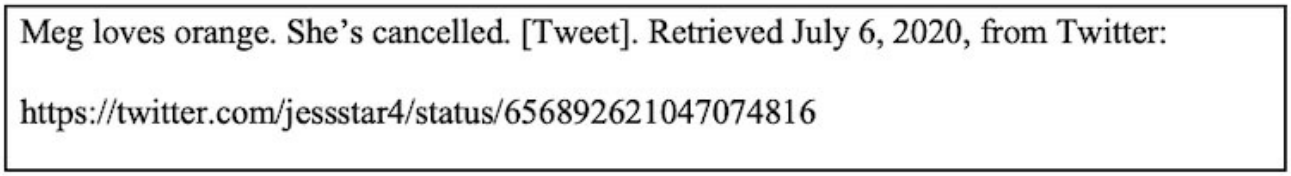

Figure 4: Jess. [jessstar4]. (2015, 21 October).

The meaning of cancel was clear in@jessstar4. Although her tweet was a short quip with little context, disapproval with a behaviour meant that the hypothetical person had to be cancelled.

So like, she's cancelled. [Tweet]. Retrieved July 6, 2020, from Twitter:

https://twitter.com/TAYL0R_MR/status/682102106430554112

Figure 5: taylor. [TAYL0R_MR]. (2015, 30 December).

Twitter user @TAYL0R_MR used the term cancelled to describe a situation where comedian Amy Schumer was caught using derogatory slurs against targeted groups. Here, @TAYL0R_MR asks if it is time to cancel this person for her norm-breaking slurs against Latina women.

From cancellation to cancel culture

Criticisms about cancellation and cancel culture tend to blame activists and social media users for cancellation, instead of the third parties with decision-making power over people that have been called-out. The call-out is the mediation between people on a network where the norm-transgressing behaviour of an individual is denounced (Sills, *et al.*, 2016). Ostracisation can occur. Individual cancellation at the personal level can also occur when friends or acquaintances of an accused person disassociate themselves. For example, actor Daniel Radcliffe who played the titular role of Harry Potter in the adaptations of J.K. Rowling's novels distanced himself from the author's position on transgender women (Lenker, 2020).

Notwithstanding the numerous call-outs by against Rowling, none has managed to affect her standing with Hachette UK, her publisher nor the movie adaptation deals with Warner Bros. In fact, the publisher banned its staff from boycotting Rowling (Harrison, 2020). If Rowling's publisher, Warner Bros, and other licensors decided to disassociate from Rowling, it would be a cancellation.

Even people who interact with celebrities through indirect networks but perceive them as part of their personal space (Meyrowitz, 1985) can individually cancel someone as we saw in Figure 3. The call-out is enacted through different forms of digital activism as described by George and Leidner (2019).

Cancellation, as described by former U.S. President Donald Trump, in a Fourth of July address at Mount Rushmore, in 2020 bemoaned and criticised cancel culture as a reaction by angry mobs to defame targeted individuals (BBC News, 2020). Critics of cancellation have denounced the practice and elevated it to widespread cultural shift they refer to as cancel culture. These cancel culture critics, often situated on the ideological right often perceive cancel culture as a reactionary repudiation and war against conservative ideologies (Fox News, 2020). Other critics of cancel culture such as comedian Dave Chappelle worry about its effects on freedom of expression (Ellis, 2019).

A common response to the accusation that cancel culture is unfairly targeting conservative positions and a threat to freedom of expression is to deny that the phenomenon exists. For example, Canadian writer Sarah Hagi (2019) writes that cancel culture as described by many critics does not exist. She argues that cancel culture does not affect all victims equally and that marginalised groups and minorities continue to experience acts similar to cancellation everyday on social media or in their everyday lives that parallel the travails denounced by critics of cancel culture (Hagi, 2019).

The full extent of that position is that cancel culture is fabricated by conservatives in order to monitor debates in the ongoing cultural wars plaguing western societies. Marginalised groups such as women, whom some argue were not permitted from participating in debates in the public sphere (Mendes, *et al.*, 2018) can rely on social media to call-out behaviour. In the words of *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones (2020), cancel culture is a reaction from individuals in positions of power against social media users using platforms to denounce norm-breaking transgressions.

The debate about the targeted victims of cancel culture and whether the phenomenon exists or not is at the level of the polemic. Neither position has enough nuances to cover the complicated nature of cancellation and cancel culture. The contention that right-leaning individuals are mainly targeted by cancel culture is false. Individuals from across the political spectrum have been targeted by cancel culture. For example, film director James Gunn was fired (but subsequently rehired) from Disney after right-wing opponents unearthed older unsavoury tweets (Knoop, 2018). Nevertheless what Hagi alludes when she writes about the cursory treatment of marginalised people and minorities online is part of the less visible aspect of cancel culture that seems to have gained traction only after it affected celebrities in reaction to the #meToo movement. People like Hagi have been faced with similar treatment to cancellation through online abuse.

What is different from older forms of online abuse that individuals like Hagi have faced in the past with cancel culture and cancellation is that third parties are involved in the sanctioning of individuals. Cancel culture exists because organisations such as employers weigh risk to their reputations when partaking in cancellation as demonstrated in the Daniel Maples case. Risk mitigation is an important motivation. Organisations do not cancel their members because of convictions. They do so to protect their own reputations (Fehr and Fischbacher, 2004) as part of crisis management plans (Coombs, 2007). However, as observed by Mucchi-Faina, *et al.* (2010) there is evidence that the involvement of minorities has influenced what appears to be imputable or not through their participation in online debates about norm-breaking.

An aspect of cancel culture that seems easy to ignore when it comes to minorities, marginalised groups and even allies is that it is cathartic (Huell, 2020). It is a form of retribution that can be enjoyed by both right and left-leaning people. While lacking nobility, admitting the cathartic side of retribution should not be dismissed in lieu for acceptable causes such as resistance or revenge.

This cathartic reaction could be in response to a sense of injustice and despair that no matter the strength of movements such as #MeToo or BlackLivesMatter, that cancellation does not affect all equally. Some individuals like Justin Trudeau whose use of blackface disguises was revealed during the 2019 Canadian federal election survive cancellation if their organisations deem them too important to cancel. Hollywood actors like Ezra Miller survived cancellation while others like Hartley Sawyer have not. Both were actors working for studios owned by the same media conglomerate. Comedian Louis C. K's career does not appear to have been affected greatly after impropriety in front of women was revealed. Thus, cancellation's efficacy depends on the risk calculations made by executives at organisations and often not on uniform and transparent policies.

Cancelling Karen

In its inception, cancellation was an act by males to eliminate mentally and emotionally women from their lives. Declaring them cancelled meant that they no longer played roles nor mattered to the "canceller." Cancellation in this context was a form of disinvestment from an initial emotional and intimate relationship. This meaning changed when its meaning morphed when Twitter users started applying it to celebrities, they criticised.

In early uses of the term cancellation with celebrities, the weight of the emotional disinvestment of a person from a well-known figure carried the same weight. To remove a celebrity and to cancel this person came at a cost and had similar effects to removing someone with whom one had a personal or intimate relationship with. Here, the celebrity as Meyrovitz (1985) suggests, became part of the life of the individual regardless of whether they were personal acquaintances or not. Thus, when the canceller cancelled them, they were not removing a stranger from their lives. They were abandoning one-sided relationships with a celebrity that had broken a norm.

Cancellation today is not only about abandoning a personal relationship with an individual or a celebrity. Cancellation is now about shunning a person with whom the canceller may or may not have any prior attachment to. For example, in most of the women labelled "Karens" cancelled by the public are non-celebrities with whom cancellers have no relationships with before the exposure event of the person on social media.

Karen was a label used to name a white woman whose interaction with an African-American was deemed racists, unjustified, and detrimental to the latter. The label Karen seemed to have been agreed upon by users of Black Twitter in March 2020 out of several labels used for such women in the past. Whereas in the past, each person was given an individual and often an alliterative label such as BBQ Becky, Cornerstore Caroline, Dorm Room Debbie, Golfcart Gail, Grocery Grace, Landscape Lucy, Permit Patty, Pool Patrol Paula, Starbucks Stacy. Karen has now emerged as the chosen label for white women denounced and publicly shamed that are in the process of being cancelled.

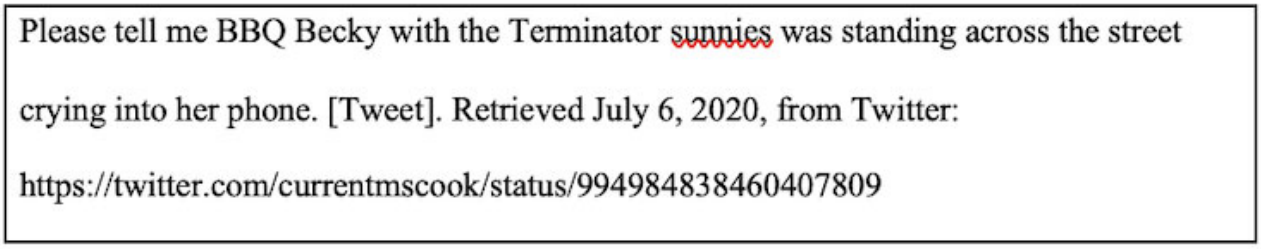

Figure 6: Katie. [currentmscook]. (2018, 11 May). Replying to @myblackmindd and @BravenakBlog.

A depersonalisation of each transgressing woman is at play by using Karen as a generic term. Even though cancellers had limited interaction or ties with transgressors with unique names, the latter became infamous enough to warrant a degree of personalisation and understanding similar to that of celebrities. With the term Karen, each woman is dismissed as another transgressor. While her transgression may be noteworthy, there is less effort sought in branding her as a unique individual. Karen as a generic label can also be an expression of fatigue with numerous transgressors, defeating the purpose of personalisation.

Women labelled Karen are ostracised and eliminated from the lives of people as expediently as the girlfriends of the fictional and living males. Female social media users also ostracise Karens as seen in Twitter user Cathy Stanley's tweet. However, no prior relationships between Karens and social media-based cancellers exist in most cases. In fact, cancellers seek personal information on Karens such as names, employment, and home addresses. This information does not to create positive rapport or relationships with these women. It is sought to support exposure practises on social media often in response to initial calls for identifying data on Karens.

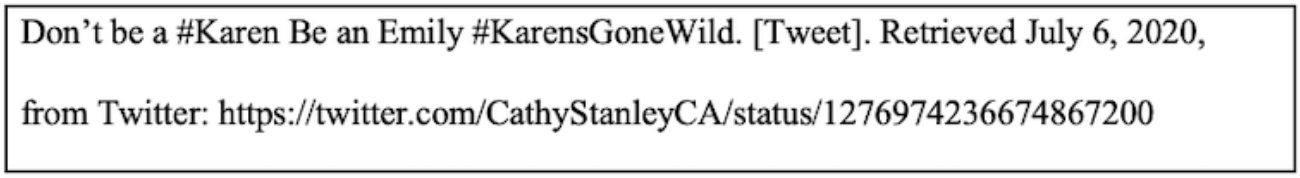

Figure 7: Stanley, C. [CathyStanleyCA]. (2020, 27 June).

Personal identifying information about the person being cancelled is necessary for the process to happen. Sought information is often found in response to the infamous "Twitter do your thing," request as seen in Figures 8 and 9. Some cancellers with prior relationships with Karens may even share private information that would otherwise not be available in public sources. For example, @Alphalance a dog walker, shared personal information on Amy Cooper, a New York City woman accused of feigning an attack and calling the police in Central Park against a black man (Figure 10).

Yooo!!! This Karen and Chad are defacing a #BlackLivesMatter mural in Martinez, CA. Twitter do your thing. [Tweet]. Retrieved July 5, 2020, from Twitter: https://twitter.com/SuaveLlave/status/1279822433793392640

Figure 8: Suave. [SuaveLlave]. (2020, 5 July).

Yesterday, these white supremacist fucks attacked a black man at Lake Monroe in Bloomington, IN. We want their faces to go viral. We want to know who they are. Twitter, do your thing. [Tweet]. Retrieved July 6, 2020, from Twitter: https://twitter.com/YDSABloomington/status/1279908582893522945

Figure 9: YDSA Bloomington. [SuaveLlave]. (2020, 5 July).

Wow, I used to walk this dog! This lady was a client of mine back when I was a dog walker 2 years ago, and coincidentally enough her last name is Cooper as well. Her name is Amy Cooper, and I'm so sorry this happened to your brother. Glad to hear nothing came of this call. [Tweet]. Retrieved July 6, 2020, from Twitter: https://twitter.com/Alphalance/status/1265035677458149376

Figure 10: Black Lives Matter, K. S.-#. [Alphalance]. (2020, 25 May).

As of this writing, there are no corresponding labels to Karen for men. Twitter users have discussed and debated appropriate terms for men but unlike women Chad (Blue, 2020), Dan (GOD, 2020), Todd (Voluntaryasmine, 2020), or Ken (Paul, 2020). None is as predominant in this class of label as Karen. The closest proxy could be the term “incel” for involuntary celibate men. Only when they are filmed such as with the tiki torch white nationalist demonstrators involved in the 2017 Charlottesville rally, can they be targeted for cancellation. While incels are thought to be Caucasian males, because they principally operate online and under the veil of fabricated online identities (Turkle, 1995), they are not an easily defined socio-demographic group.

The term Karen also describes the socio-demographic group corresponding to Generation X women (Strapagiel, 2019). As such, Karen is a current incarnation of earlier terms such as superwoman or soccer mom or even earlier labels such as the 1920s’ pencil woman, but with a pernicious twist when combined with social media-based activism.

The lack of predominant stereotypes and labels for men demonstrates different perceptions of women in public discourse. Is the difficulty in the creation of labels and stereotypes for men a result of the process of othering of women in the public sphere? Are women, much like racialised groups such as Asians and African-Americans easier to typecast as Karens, Fu Manchus, tiger moms, Uncle Bens, and Aunt Jemima? Karens occupy an altered traditional role in North American culture that corresponds to modified archetypes often given to women. Morphing from Generation X soccer moms, Karens now inhabit the space reserved for privileged white women.

In the United States, many social media users perceive white women as pernicious and playing an important role in the brutality and cultural attacks against black men in particular (Carby, 1985). They see the pernicious role of white women in the current information economy as a continuation of the role past white women played in American culture in a system of systemic racism where they used their power against African-Americans. This role is based on moral panics about the threat to white women and a need to protect them against transgressing black men (Apel, 2004). The perception of Karens as the silent enemy of African-Americans could explain the coalescing determination to cancel white women on social media today.

Cancellation may not be gender-neutral nor equal towards men and women. Originally meant as a form of repudiation of women by men, cancellation of norm-breaking females may be harsher. I posit that while abhorrent and wrongful, the public does not perceive male transgressions, such as sexual harassment that can lead to cancellation as norm-breaking to the same extent as the discrimination of Karens towards African-Americans. The transgressions of non-celebrity women may be perceived as worse than the sexual transgressions male celebrities or known figures. In a sense, the #MeToo movement may target public figures more than non-celebrities.

Conclusion

In this article, I set out to explore cancel culture and cancellation, which is a subset of the former. Cancellation affects individuals differently. Social and moral norms are evolving and finding a structure is spaces like social media. What was a mild bad joke a decade ago today is ground for termination. Even the equivalent of a road rage in a store, as with the Daniel Maples case shows, are now grounds for termination. This worries people on both sides of the political spectrum. Termination and other punitive measures can only happen when third parties with oversight over transgressing individuals take action. Thus, complaints against the attacks on freedom of expression, defamation, or denial that cancel culture exists does not fully capture the situation that networks of cancellers use public ostracisation to compel enforcement of norms by third parties.

Having defined and explore the basics of cancel culture, in future studies, I intend to empirically map out networks of cancellation using social network analyses. Future studies can help further an understanding of cancel culture by explaining how social media segments, such as Black Twitter call-out transgressing individuals and how third parties with oversight react to calls for cancellation.

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