

Cancel Culture – by Anastasiya Jurukovski

Cancel culture — a phenomenon which often takes the form of an informal boycott, based on past wrongs committed by something or someone — can be both a negative and positive force in modern society.

Cancel culture can be seen from many different points of view. Some love the idea of being able to take down the “big bad wolf” – the villain seemingly plaguing everyone – but others simply wish to step back and see the bigger picture or watch how it unfolds, and still others view it as a very harmful way to get a (possibly) positive result. Some have argued that cancel culture has a terrible effect on public discourse and rather than being a way of speaking truth, power has spun out of control and become a senseless form of social media mob rule.

Calling people out for their wrongdoings seems like the right thing to do in most situations, but doing so without proper evidence, based on misinformation — simply jumping on the back of a cancel culture train and going for a ride — could have serious repercussions and even the potential to ruin someone’s life.

For many people, publicly calling for accountability has become a form of social justice, using social platforms to reach the masses, and spread their message in seconds. In many ways, cancel culture can be a positive force in our modern interconnected society.

The internet has given people the ability to stand up and say what they believe, to preach what they think to otherwise likeminded people. Giving people the right to be able to stand up and say what they think is a great responsibility, and cancel culture ensures that people are held accountable for how they use their freedom of speech. Cancelling someone can bring to light their past actions, highlighting truly important information about this person or wrongs they may have committed.

Cancel culture has proven itself useful, ceasing or halting the career or credibility of a public figure. An everyday person could remove the wool from the eyes of the seemingly blind, so to speak, and show us the truth about someone we idolise. They give us knowledge so we may form our own opinions, so we can decide for ourselves what we may think on an issue or about a person, and their actions.

In a 2018 New York Times article about cancel culture, Lisa Nakamura, a Professor at the University of Michigan who studies the intersection of digital media and race, gender and sexuality said “[cancel culture] is a cultural boycott. It’s an agreement not to amplify, signal boost, give money to. People talk about the attention economy — when you deprive someone of your attention, you’re depriving them of a livelihood.”

Cancel culture has been incredibly effective at combating sexism, racism, and many other types of abuse or harmful wrongdoings to others. It has held people accountable for their actions in ways that were simply not possible in the past. It has prevented terrible people from getting away with doing or saying terrible things.

“Cancelling”, is not only a 21st century phenomenon. “Cancelling” once known as “boycotting”, can be traced back to the civil rights movements of the 1950s, where politicians and companies were criticised and avoided by progressive movements for their refusal to acknowledge the

changing social structures of society. The main way that the public showed their displeasure with these individuals and companies was by “voting with their wallet”.

A free-market economy is based on the idea of supply and demand. For politicians and celebrities, their reputation is their product. If that individual's reputation is not in demand due to their beliefs and behaviours, it is absolutely within the rights of fans, constituents, and consumers to 'vote with their wallet' and boycott, thereby reducing the 'supply' of that individual from producers, political parties, and companies.

Cancel culture is the modern-day boycott: an effective way for 'the little guy' to demonstrate their displeasure with established public figures. Critics of 'cancel culture' wish to negate and defy the system of supply and demand by allowing those in danger of cancellation to remain in supply, despite diminished demand.

But while cancel culture can be a good thing, we must be aware of the negative impact it can have on people's lives before we fully commit to cancelling them. We must read between the lines and know when to mention these things.

Mimi Groves was 15 when she sent a three-second video to a friend, after getting a learner's permit to drive, in which she says, “I can drive,” followed by a racial slur. That video was then sent to other people, and Jimmy Galligan, a person of colour her age, saved it. Three years later, Mimi Groves, now an adult, got a scholarship to a good university and was using her Instagram account to show support for the Black Lives Matter movement. It was at this time that Jimmy Galligan decided to release the video, with the openly stated intent of making her pay for it, resulting in Groves being the target of a wave of abuse, followed by pressure by the university's administrators for her to drop out, which she eventually did.

While in no way were Mimi's actions appropriate, the effect it had on her life was almost irreversible. Her use of racial slurs was unacceptable but what happened to her due to something she said years ago is unjustified. People and their values, opinions, and views can change over time. This is where cancel culture becomes problematic. "When something which someone posted years ago resurfaces, and that person is then hated upon for their past actions — even though they would never say or do those things now — this is extremely unjust."

Kimberly Foster, founder and editor-in-chief of the blog *For Harriet*, has addressed this issue in a video called “We Can't Cancel Everyone,” in which Foster points out that isolating people does not undo the harm they have done. “Changing culture meaningfully means approaching folks from the standpoint of ‘these harmful ideas you are perpetuating need to go,’” Foster says. “We're not going to accept this anymore. But the people themselves can be recovered.”

For cancel culture to be a positive force, those involved must evaluate the situation, read between the lines before “cancelling”, and gauge whether it is justified. Cancel culture can be both a negative and positive influence in modern society, but it must be used sparingly if it is to have any meaning in the future.