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Cancel the Behavior, Not the Person

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Cancel the Behavior, Not the Person

By: McKenna Wychunas

Key words: Cancel Culture, Wicked Problem, Accountability, Canceling, Social Media, Celebrities, Influencers.

Abstract:

A wicked problem is one that is here to stay, no matter how many solutions are thought of. No matter the solution, it will always interfere with another wicked problem, leaving it in an endless cycle. Cancel culture will always exist, even if it becomes less intense, it will still be here. Though there are differing opinions on the topic of cancel culture, I have researched the negative side to canceling, and I have provided examples of real-life people that have been affected by it. Along with that, I have also given a variety of feasible solutions that could help lessen the intensity of cancel culture.

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Cancel culture is a wicked problem that is destroying people's reputations, damaging mental health, and creating a negative online environment. There is no one definition of cancel culture, but Sarah Hagi, magazine writer and victim of cancel culture, defines it in her TIME magazine article as "The idea is that if you do something that others deem problematic, you automatically lose all your currency. Your voice is silenced. You're done." (Hagi 28). With social media being more and more prominent in our lives as the years go on, it is important to recognize how severe and out of hand this problem is becoming due to the damaging effect it has on people in real-life, especially social media influencers and celebrities.

Cancel culture is a real worsening problem that is causing more issues than people may think. It is possible to create change, and it starts with us. If we want to create a positive online environment where everyone feels comfortable and safe, we can start thinking about what we post and question whether it would be harmful to the person on the other side of the screen. Canceling bad behaviors rather than a person, advocating for things we believe in, and spreading awareness in hopes of helping others, whether it be online or in real-life, are all ways in which we can make change. We can hold people in the wrong accountable without defining them by their mistakes or minor transgressions, sending them death-threats, or sending them any other form of hate.

Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, design theorists from the 1970s, coined the term "wicked problem" and found that there are specific characteristics that define one. Cancel culture is a wicked problem because no matter what solutions are given, the solutions are always

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linked to another wicked problem. There is not one specific way to solve this problem of cancel culture or test any solutions to the problem. As long as social media exists, cancel culture will always exist with it. My approaches to thinking about my wicked problem are understanding the perspectives of those doing the canceling as well as those being canceled. Also, accounting for the reasons why it occurs so that the blame is not necessarily on any one group. This is personal to me because I strongly empathize with people, especially those being hurt or bullied by others, and I know firsthand how cruel and hateful the internet can be.

My thinking is expanding as I do more research, which is because of the many different perspectives there are to learn about. I have seen a lot of social media influencers and celebrities being canceled on social media platforms, and I have also seen it on documentaries and reality TV shows. It really does take a toll on people's mental health, as you will see in later examples, and some go as far as to even attempt or commit suicide. Even if a rumor that has not yet been proven starts surfacing on the internet, people are quick to cancel, completely damaging one's reputation. Robby Soave, writer for the New York Times, says, "I think it's the climate that we live in now of being held accountable in a very severe and punitive way for things you've said or done maybe recently, but maybe in the distant past, that don't totally reflect who you are as a person but come to define you and come to cause you to really suffer." I am taking the approach that I am because cancelling a person is wrong but holding someone accountable and canceling their behavior is right, and by that, I mean letting the person know that they've done something wrong, and allowing them to address the situation, apologize, learn, grow, and move on.

There is a YouTube video by Jubilee, an account dedicated to discussing controversial and important topics in today's society, that demonstrates both sides to canceling, and whether it

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is right or wrong. In this video, there are six different people talking about their views on cancel culture. Three of them are pro-cancel culture, and the other three are anti-cancel culture. The pro side was talking about how cancel culture is a form activism, and that if someone is accused of doing wrong, people should stop supporting them entirely. On the other hand, the anti-cancel culture side said that all people are going to be flawed and make mistakes, and it is an individual's right to stop supporting someone based on what they have done wrong. The anti-cancel culture group also went on to talk about how celebrities are not defined by their mistakes, and how they should not be cancelled as if they are an object. They are human beings too, which is what I think most people forget. Celebrities and social media influencers are not indestructible just because they have a bigger following.

According to Rob Henderson, doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge, there are 5 things that propel cancel culture. People want to increase the perception of their social status by participating in cancel culture. They think that others will see them as the "better person" if they openly condemn the wrongfulness of a situation or person. Also, humans want to feel a sense of belongingness and connection, so they will do anything to improve social status today, especially on social media. On the contrary, cancel culture could also be used to decrease the social status of others. People do not often praise others for good acts of kindness, but they are very quick to call people out as soon as they make a mistake. When someone speaks out about an issue that decreases the social status of another, they feel that they receive a higher social status in return. Commitment to a specific community that people value may also cause them to partake in cancel culture as if they feel it is their duty for that community.

The term 'cancel culture' is now rendered meaningless due to the many contexts it is used in. It is important to know that there is a fine line between more serious issues compared

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to minor transgressions that were brought up from people's past. In the case of a more serious issue or crime that somebody has committed, it should be up to the person or community that was harmed to decide how they want to hold somebody accountable, and whether they are willing to forgive the person at fault. In my case, I am not trying to silence victims of these more serious issues, but instead, I am speaking on behalf of those who are being canceled for things they have done in their past that do not reflect who they are as a person, those who have rumors or false accusations being constantly made about them, and those who are genuinely good people that just so happen to make small mistakes. Without mistakes, how would humans ever learn and grow? If every single person reading this were to be defined by their mistakes, then we would all be canceled. Even those who are accused of something they did not do are being canceled, which takes it to whole different level.

In a documentary that I watched on Netflix about the vanishing of 21-year-old Elisa Lam at the Cecil Motel in Las Angeles, a severe case of cancel culture was featured. Morbid was a Mexican death metal musician, photographer, and screenwriter of 15 years, and he was falsely accused of murdering Elisa Lam. Morbid had been staying at the Cecil Motel around the same time that Elisa had been missing. Web sleuths found videos on his YouTube account of him at the motel, and they assumed because of his dark, scary content, appearance, and type of music that he was making, that he was the one who murdered Elisa Lam. Because of this assumption, thousands of people sent him death threats, reported all his content, and got his accounts removed. After all of this, Morbid attempted to take his own life and ended up going to a psychiatric hospital. "The web sleuths go on with their life like nothing happened. But they really turned my life upside down," Morbid says in the documentary. "I do feel like I have lost my freedom of expression. I have not actually made any more music. When I try, it's not the

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same." Cancel culture changed the life, career, and mentality of an innocent individual for the worse.

A more recent occurrence of cancel culture involves Bachelor contestant Rachel Kirkconnel and host Chris Harrison. Rachel was the winner of the latest season of the Bachelor, which just so happened to be the first time in history that the Bachelor, Matt James, was a black man. After Rachel won, racially insensitive pictures of her from a plantation college party in 2018 resurfaced on the internet. In an interview with Chris Harrison, he defended Rachel's behavior which led to both being canceled all over social media. Rachel then apologized and explained that what he did was out of pure lack of education and not maliciousness, and she promised to educate herself and take necessary steps to become a better person. Chris Harrison ended up taking a break from the show and Emmanuel Acho, former NFL and sports analyst, hosted the Bachelor finale instead of Chris. On the finale, they brought out Rachel and Matt and she was asked to speak on the issue circulating on the internet. Matt then respectfully decided that he no longer wanted to pursue a relationship with her due to her lack of education and past racial insensitivity. The host then asked her what steps she was planning on taking moving forward to educate herself. She apologized, and Matt accepted her apology. Rachel is only 24 years old and was receiving death threats from people all over the internet accusing her of being a terrible person. They canceled her, even before giving her a chance to apologize to the community she was racially insensitive to in the past. The canceling online was not helpful at all in attempting to make her address the situation because of the things people were saying to her. However, the way she was held accountable on live television was very effective in allowing her to take responsibility for her past actions in which she did not make any excuses for.

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Something that I see about the nature of this problem is that the people who are doing the canceling are taking the attention away from real-life issues by putting all the attention on the person or celebrity who is being ‘canceled’. The Metropolitan State University of Denver writes, “But when the social-media masses "cancel" a person for perceived transgressions, are they effectively advancing the causes in whose names they act, such as social justice or racial and gender equity?” They believe canceling is a form of advocacy or a fight for social justice when there are more effective ways to make change. Creating or signing petitions for certain causes, emailing people or organizations in power and demanding change, reading books to further education and understanding, sharing hotlines on social media to help those dealing with a mental health crisis, starting a club with others who want to create change, are all ways to create change. Distracting people from the trends of cancel culture by advocating in these ways is what will eventually make a huge difference in the decline of cancel culture on social media.

Many questions will be remained unanswered, but that is just the nature of a wicked problem like this. If we want to create a positive environment online where everyone feels comfortable and safe, then we need to start thinking about what we are posting online. We need to start advocating and spreading awareness about issues without putting all the attention entirely on a single person. Although there are no definite solutions, we can all still do our part and treat people online, especially celebrities and social media influencers, as if they were not just behind a screen.

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