

DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture”

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Communication and the Public
1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/2057047320961562

journals.sagepub.com/home/ctp



Abstract

The term “cancel culture” has significant implications for defining discourses of digital and social media activism. In this essay, I briefly interrogate the evolution of digital accountability praxis as performed by Black Twitter, a meta-network of culturally linked communities online. I trace the practice of the social media callout from its roots in Black vernacular tradition to its misappropriation in the digital age by social elites, arguing that the application of useful anger by minoritized people and groups has been effectively harnessed in social media spaces as a strategy for networked framing of extant social problems. This strategy is challenged, however, by the dominant culture’s ability to narrativize the process of being “canceled” as a moral panic with the potential to upset the concept of a limited public sphere.

Keywords

Black Twitter, cancel culture, intersectionality, public sphere, Twitter

In July 2020, Harper’s Magazine published “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate” signed more than 150 notable public figures who aligned to speak out against the development of “a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity,” or more colloquially put, the threat of “cancel culture.” While limited in scope, I use this essay to briefly map an etymological examination of “canceling” as digital discursive accountability praxis, from its origins in Black oral tradition to its misappropriation by social elites. I begin with a definition of what it means to be “canceled” by contextualizing the power relations that inform the assumption of an equitable public sphere. I then call on digital intersectionality theory to explicate the roots of Black digital discursive practice. Finally, I argue that while social media callouts are a form of networked framing (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), they have been effectively and

tellingly counter-framed through application of the reductive and malignant label “cancel culture.”

Called out, called in, canceled

Jonah Engel Bromwich, a style writer for the *New York Times* described the digital phenomenon of being canceled as “total disinvestment in something (anything)” (2018, npa). As I explained to him, “canceling” is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money. The term has since devolved into journalistic shorthand wielded as a

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tool for silencing marginalized people who have adapted earlier resistance strategies for effectiveness in the digital space.

“Cancel *culture*” is situated within the Habermasian concept of the public sphere which assumes public discourse is the realm of the elites (1962). Earlier examples of discursive accountability practices, including reading, dragging, calling out, in and even canceling,¹ are the creations of Black counterpublics that are conspicuously absent from the American public imaginary, which holds a lofty vision of newspaper op-ed pages, radio shows, town-hall meetings, and the like as forums of debate where a multiplicity of discursive publics are equally empowered to engage in debate and the free expression of ideas. This simply isn’t so.

For instance, canceling’s analog antecedents—blacklisting and boycotting—are also mediated processes, though limited both in scope and effectiveness by factors of structural power, time, and access to resources. Producers and casting directors, for example, have the ability to categorically deny employment in the entertainment industry. Admissions officers, regents, and donors have enjoyed similar influence on college campuses. Even the measured success of Civil Rights era boycotts depended on global media attention to gain traction. Thus, any examination of so-called “cancel culture” must begin with an analysis of the power relations by which it is defined. Only a perspective that prioritizes the communication histories and practices of disempowered people can adequately decipher the phrase’s use as a tool to delegitimize the dissension that echoes from society’s margins.

Canceling a person, place, or thing is socially mediated phenomena with origins in queer communities of color. Black Twitter—the meta-network of culturally connected communities on the microblogging site (Clark, 2015)—made the language of being “canceled” into an internet meme (Shifman, 2013). The reference was subsequently seized upon by outside observers, particularly journalists with an outsized ability to amplify the(ir own) white gaze. Politicians, pundits, celebrities, academics, and everyday people alike have narrativized being canceled into a moral panic akin to actual harm, adding a neologic twist on the origin of the practice by associating it with an unfounded fear of censorship and

silencing. But being canceled—a designation, it should be noted, usually reserved for celebrities, brands, and otherwise out-of-reach figures—should be read as a last-ditch appeal for justice.

“Originally a practice of Black women ‘signifyin,’ [the callout] has occasionally been mistaken for Twitter’s ‘mob mentality,’ but it is qualitatively different: it is often a critique of systemic inequality rather than an attack against specific, individualistic transgressions” (Brock, 2020). As venture community management, the callout on social media platforms such as Twitter is a form of activism; feminized labor in the digital economy undertaken voluntarily to protect the particularly vulnerable in online spaces (Nakamura, 2015). The use of broadcast-style social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube,² allow marginalized groups to engage in networked framing, a process by which collective experiences of an offending party’s (or their proxy’s) unjust behavior is discussed, morally evaluated, and prescribed a remedy—such as being fired or choosing to resign—through the collective reasoning of culturally aligned online crowds (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013, p. 159).

It may involve reading another individual—giving them a dressing down that uses colorful and descriptive language and an incisive ability to articulate appraisal of another’s character. Reading, which begat *calling out* (which begat canceling), is an “indigenous expressive form” particular to the Other. It has been perfected by Black women like our grandmothers, who let us know what they see, even if they don’t directly say it; minors deprived of a sense of agency, who quickly learn how to detect and name adults’ ulterior motives; and queer folk whose first line of defense is withering critique (Johnson, 2011, pp. 434, 437, and 443). While these interactions usually go unnoticed, the clashes between strong and weak publics, particularly on Twitter, expose the conceptual limits of a singular public sphere for the chaotic deliberation required in the development of a truly liberal democracy (Fraser, 1990, p. 77). Not every critique can come wrapped up in niceties and polite speech. Nor should it. Sometimes, the urgency and weight of oppression require us to immediately cry out.

The idea of “cancel culture,” as implied by the letter, is a phenomena uniquely enabled by

capitalism's demands on the media production side, and on the audience side, by our connectivity to social media. Social media is a space where journalists—who possess the ability to amplify otherwise unremarkable conversations—have extracted and decontextualized so many rich traditions of Black communicative practice to meet the demand for media content that will draw readers/listeners/viewers' attention, while failing to provide adequate cultural context to explain why these debates are and should be a part of mainstream public discourse. As Tynes et al. (2012) explain in their advancement of digital intersectionality theory: "Countering dominant discourses on social media as conversation is intersectional, multidimensional and *less restricted*. This enables users to effectively 'talk back' and mobilize around topics outside the view of the mainstream, until they go viral, at which point they gain the desired attention of the [mainstream news] media" (p. 33; emphasis and qualifiers mine).

You gon' learn . . . but we got to teach ya

In 2013, during Black Twitter's summer of accountability, celebrity chef Paula Deen, Juror B37 in the trial of Trayvon Martin's killer, and white feminists everywhere were examples of this back talk when their acts of workplace bigotry, opportunism, and limited commitments to solidarity (respectively) were called out via hashtags and an online petition. Aside from Deen's hostile workplace lawsuit, none of these incidents would have been considered substantive enough to warrant news coverage, but Black Twitter's online activity around each of them triggered news media systems, demanding coverage. Hashtag-driven discussion of these incidents, as well as cases in which ordinary people are caught on tape attempting to police and harass Black folks (#BBQBecky, #PoolPatrolPaula), push the ever-present issue of everyday racism to the top of the news media's agenda. Several of the Harper's letter signatories have been at the center of these processes, where the online discourse of the undifferentiated masses characterizes debate about fitting punishment for people who break with evolving social norms. The rapid mobilization in digital

resistance and accountability practice among otherwise disempowered peoples compel us to identify who or what defines the disputed concept of the public sphere, who sets the rules of engagement, and thus what is considered "talking back" to dominant discourses.

James Davison Hunter, a sociologist and author of the 1990s culture wars thesis mapped these contours of power perfectly, declaring that "public discourse is a discourse of elites. That is where you find this conflict at its most incendiary. . . . The power of *culture* is the power to define reality, the power to frame the debate, and that power resides among the elites." Thus framing these unruly discourses as "cancel *culture*" has found utility among those who wish to quash any attempts to critique their social position. It evokes the enduring schema of an ongoing battle between those Hunter conceived of as elites—those with advantageous positions in the Matrix of Domination (Collins, 1990)—and everyone else. Hunter belies the shared belief among those who promote the culture wars thesis as their investment in the limitations of the Habermasian public sphere concept, which privileges the elite class and allows no room for alternative and dissenting public, nor acknowledges relations between powerful and disempowered groups (Fraser, 1990, p. 77). While Fraser's critique of "actually existing democracy" provides four clear objectives for critically theorizing the public sphere concept that the signatories of the Harper's letter claimed to defend, too much attention is paid to its limitations. I prefer the expansiveness offered by Lorde's theory of "useful anger" as guide to reconciling the uppity, loud, slick, cutting, and unrelenting critique levied as unruly speech (Olson, 2011):

We are working in a context of oppression and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action. (Lorde, 1984)

Social media allows hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of everyday people to leverage networked

collectivity and a sense of immediacy to demand accountability from a range of powerful figures, including individuals—such as Russell Simmons’ ill-conceived #HarrietTubmanSexTape; and institutions—such as the universities called out by #ConcernedStudent1950 and #BeingBlackAtMichigan. For so long, the concentric circles of the social elite in arts, media, business, and politics were insulated by the norms of acceptable discourse, distanced from the realities of Others who struggle through life without access to the specific privileges afforded along lines of race, gender, and class. As digital connectivity shrinks those gaps, the demand for new social standards outpaces the willingness of the comfortable to consider just what their professed commitment to the promotion of social equity may actually cost them. Unfortunately, the expansiveness of the internet and its outside influence on news and entertainment media doesn’t bode well for parsing the nuance of such clamorous conversation. The noise of online harassment, doxxing, and bad-faith piling on that has evolved from the callout, the read, and the drag drowns out Black Twitter’s approach toward demanding accountability in digital spaces.

The problem with so-called “cancel culture” does not rest with the formerly disempowered, seemingly faceless public that the letter critiques, but with the signatories and their peers, “. . . the institutional leaders,” who, “in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms.” These self-appointed regents of open debate have failed to anticipate an age in which there is no longer a dominant public sphere, but a fractal sequence of counterspheres and oppositional publics. They have yet to reconcile how coalitions of the Othered are now equipped to execute a responsive strategy for immediately identifying harms and demanding consequences. The absence of deliberation in chastising bad actors, misconstrued as the outcome of cancel culture, is a fault of the elites’ inability to adequately conceive of the impact social media connectivity has for shifting the power dynamics of the public sphere in the digital age.

In their attempt to separate Black discursive accountability praxes—calling out, reading, and canceling—from their origins in the creative spaces occupied by the oppressed, and reposition them as a

threat to their real and aspirational peers, elite public figures fall victim to their own worst fears: a realization that the social capital they’ve worked so hard for is hyperinflated currency in the attention economy.

Notes

1. These practices deserve attention in a typology all their own, a responsibility that is best left to Black scholars of our linguistic traditions.
2. I am not referring to the “drama channels” of YouTube, where influencers use gossip, trash-talking and backbiting to gamify the algorithm and draw more users to their online presence.

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