Cancel culture has become a mainstream idea. | AFP via Getty Images

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 | Updated Aug 25, 2020, 12:03pm EDT

Editor's note, May 10, 2021: The information in this story was last updated in August 2020. This look at the origins and mainstreaming of cancel culture has continued relevance, but the discourse around cancel culture has evolved. See **Vox's 2021 explainer on the cancel culture debate** for more on the issue.

Within the turbulent past few years, the idea that a person can be "canceled" — in other words, culturally blocked from having a prominent public platform or career — has

become a polarizing topic of debate. The rise of "cancel culture" and the idea of canceling someone coincides with a familiar pattern: 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.

To many people, this process of publicly calling for accountability, and boycotting if nothing else seems to work, has become an important tool of social justice — a way of combatting, through collective action, some of the huge power imbalances that often exist between public figures with far-reaching platforms and audiences, and the people and communities their words and actions may harm.

But conservative politicians and pundits have increasingly embraced the argument that cancel culture, rather than being a way of speaking truth to power, has spun out of control and become a senseless form of social media mob rule. At the 2020 Republican National Convention, for example, numerous speakers, including President Trump, addressed cancel culture directly, and one delegate resolution even **explicitly targeted** the phenomenon, describing it as having "grown into erasing of history, encouraging lawlessness, muting citizens, and violating free exchange of ideas, thoughts, and speech."

Actually ending someone's career through the power of public backlash is difficult. Few entertainers or other public figures have truly been canceled — that is, while they may have faced considerable negative criticism and calls to be held accountable for their statements and actions, very few of them have truly experienced career-ending repercussions.

Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, for example, has faced intense criticism from her own fans since she began to **voice transphobic beliefs**, making her one of the most prominently "canceled" individuals at the center of the cancel culture debate. But following Rowling's publication, in June 2020, of a transphobic manifesto, sales of the author's books actually **increased tremendously** in her home country of Great Britain.

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Continued support for those who ostensibly face cancellation demonstrates that instead of destroying someone's livelihood, becoming a target of criticism and backlash can instead encourage public sympathy. Yet to hear Shane Gillis (who **lost a job at *Saturday Night Live* in 2019** after past racist and homophobic jokes came to light) 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 Louis C.K. and Roseanne Barr, who both **lost jobs** and fans that year, C.K. after confessing to **sexual misconduct** and Barr after making a **racist tweet**. "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 have much measurable effect, does cancel culture even exist? Or does the very idea of being canceled work to deter potentially bad behavior?

These questions are receiving more and more mainstream consideration, as the idea of cancel culture itself evolves 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

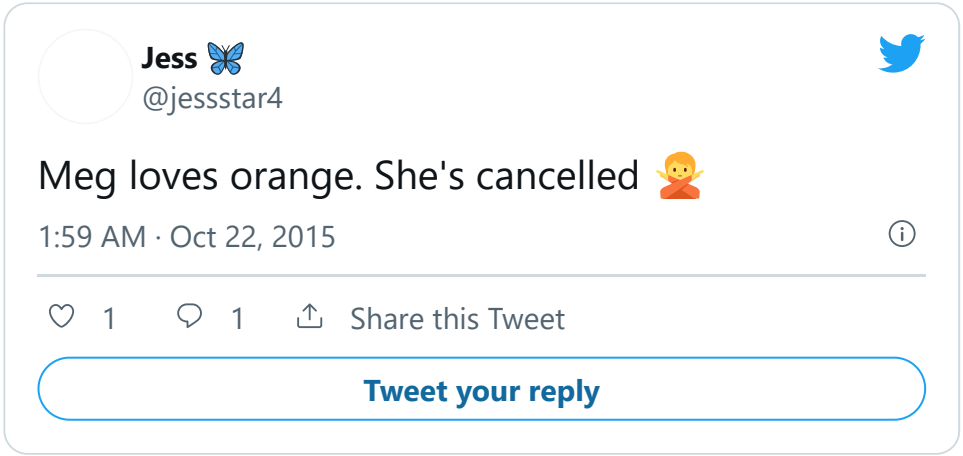
Given how frequently it's been used to repudiate sexism and misogyny, it's ironic that the concept of "canceling" shares its DNA with a misogynistic joke. One of the first references to canceling someone comes in the 1991 film *New Jack City*, in which Wesley Snipes plays a gangster named Nino Brown. **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 reportedly owe this witticism to screenwriter **Barry Michael Cooper**.)

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.

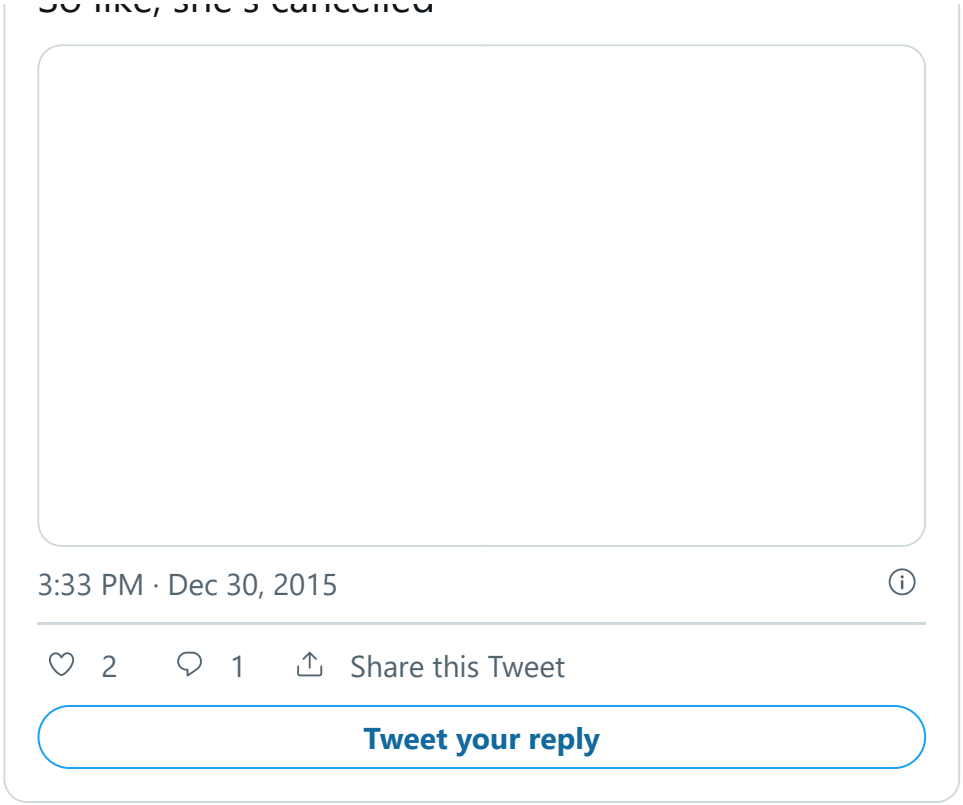
But canceling seems to have gotten its first big boost into the zeitgeist from an episode of VH1's reality show *Love and Hip-Hop: New York* that aired in December 2014, in which cast member Cisco Rosado tells his love interest Diamond Strawberry during a fight, "**you're canceled**." Even with zero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

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

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



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.



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

Tweet your reply

Even though these early examples are distinct from one another, they contained the seeds of what cancel culture would become: a trend of communal calls to boycott a celebrity whose behavior was 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 has sometimes referred to this collectivized narrative 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, and the approach has been used by fans of all kinds to deploy 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 dating 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, 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 likened the act of canceling someone to a boycott, but of a person rather than a business. She said it also promotes the idea that Black people should be empowered to reject pop culture that spreads 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 a dominant force behind much of pop culture. Platforms like Twitter give a louder collective voice to Black people and members of other marginalized communities 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.'"

From that perspective, cancel culture can serve as a corrective for the sense of powerlessness that many people feel. But as it has 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 suffer lasting career setbacks. But witnessing cancel culture backlash seems to send some people into panic mode.

It's true that some celebrities have effectively been canceled, in the sense that their actions have resulted in major consequences, including job losses and major reputational declines, if not a complete end to their careers.

Consider **Harvey Weinstein**, **Bill Cosby**, and **Kevin Spacey**, who faced allegations of rape and sexual assault that became impossible to ignore, and who were charged with crimes for their offenses. They have all effectively been "canceled" — Weinstein and Cosby because they're now convicted criminals, and Spacey because while all charges against him to date have been dropped, he's **too tainted** to hire.

Along with Roseanne Barr, who lost her hit TV show after a **racist tweet**, and Louis C.K., who **saw major professional setbacks** after he admitted to **years of sexual misconduct** against female colleagues, their offenses were serious enough to irreparably damage their careers, alongside a push to lessen their cultural influence. But even 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. And of course J.K. Rowling **continues to write and publish new books**, and to profit off the ever-lucrative Harry Potter empire.

"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 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. Take the case of comedian Kevin Hart, who became the subject of **backlash** after he was selected to host the 2019 Oscars, with critics pointing to homophobic jokes and tweets that Hart had made in the past. When prompted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to address the matter publicly, Hart promptly **stepped down from the gig**, saying that he would not apologize, because he had previously addressed homophobic jokes that he made from 2009 through 2011, and believed he had changed. "I've moved on, and I'm in a complete different space in my life," Hart said in an **Instagram video** at the time. "You feed internet trolls, you reward them. I'm not gonna do it."

Hart eventually issued a new **apology**, then spent weeks **discussing the incident** as though he were a victim of merciless public shaming, dismissing the real cruelty inherent in his old comedy rhetoric while blaming the targets of that cruelty — queer people — for pointing it out.

A 2019 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." That same year, **the New Republic's Osita Nwanevu observed** just how frequently media outlets had compared cancel culture to violent political uprisings, ranging from ethnocide to torture under dictatorial regimes.

Such hyperbolic comparisons might feel reasonable to someone who's facing immense public backlash, but to proponents of cancel culture, they seem 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 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,” Rose 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 **a 2019 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.”

Ross further wrote that “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 argued, “become the self-appointed guardians of political purity.”

But among proponents of canceling is a sense that any losses 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 2018, in response to the **past comments by Kevin Hart** that ultimately lost him the Oscars hosting gig.

“[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 in the eyes of 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 to many opponents of cancel culture, a vital element of the debate is the belief that other people can change. 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,” Rose 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.”

Nonetheless, 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 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.

Correction: An earlier version of this article credited *New Jack City* screenwriter **Thomas Lee Wright** with writing the phrase "cancel that bitch." Co-screenwriter **Barry Michael Cooper** has **claimed credit** for writing that scene.

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