



CANCEL CULTURE

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‘Cancel Culture’: A Complex Media Problem for Our Complicated Times

Mikhail Yakovlev

On 13th June this year, a new satellite channel launched in the UK. Its self-described mission? To give a voice to the silent majority who, according to its Chairman Andrew Neil, have been ‘cancelled’ by elite media and their ‘woke’ agenda. If this sounds remarkably similar to the incoherent anti-media messaging that used to come from Donald Trump’s ‘cancelled’ Twitter account, this is because it is .

Unfortunately, this silenced majority has not come through. According to the clickbait title of a review in The Guardian , “GB News launch gains more viewers than BBC or Sky news channels”. But, when these figures are broken down in the very same article, they are far less impressive. During the 19:00 to 23:00 slot on the day of the big launch, GB News received 1.1% of audience share, compared to BBC News Channel’s 0.9% and Sky News’s 0.4%. But, BBC 1’s flagship ‘News at Ten’ attracted an altogether more impressive 30.6% of the audience. Since then, GB News ratings have plunged altogether, reaching 0 after the Channel’s boycott of taking the knee .

The Great British News flop points to the confusing place of ‘cancel culture’, in our increasingly confusing world. While right-wing media and Twitter ‘personalities’ accuse mainstream media and social media companies of complicity in woke ‘cancel culture’, it is the most marginalised voices that remain silenced in conventional and social media .

At the same time, it is important not to downplay legitimate concerns about freedom of speech and toxic mob take-downs, such as doxxing , especially prevalent on some social media like WeChat.

Unfortunately, it is precisely these complex and muddy dynamics that render ‘cancel culture’ such a confusing phenomenon and term. To get to the bottom of things, Media Diversity Institute (MDI) asked six academics, writers, and activists one major question – what is ‘cancel culture’ and who/what is threatened by it?

The ‘Cancel Culture’ Series is also available on Media Diversity Institute’s website: www.media-diversity.org

Dr Angela Martinez Dy



Dr Angela Martinez Dy (she/her) is a Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship at Loughborough University London. Her publications are available on Google Scholar .

The popular understanding of cancel culture is rooted in the use of digital technologies, especially social media, to speak out collectively when we perceive someone to have acted in a way that has caused harm or damage. Creating hashtags on social media platforms, enabling waves of critical information sharing about individuals who are otherwise unaccountable, and who may have large followings or 'platforms', is a way of interrupting traditional power dynamics that protect abusers and harm-doers. It is a technology that Black feminists and feminists of colour have mobilised particularly well, and was taken up more widely through, for example, the #MeToo movement which itself was initiated by Tarana Burke, a Black feminist youth worker, years prior to its uptake in Hollywood. The idea that one could be 'deplatformed' emerged from this cultural turn, which rose to a crescendo in the summer of 2020 in the middle of the first wave of the COVID crisis and the international Movement for Black Lives. This moment of crisis spurred author and activist adrienne maree brown to write an essay in response, which later became her book *We Will Not Cancel Us*, in which she carefully critiques the tactic of cancellation through a transformative justice lens.

However, the notion that cancel culture, which can indeed cause additional harm, poses a fundamental threat to freedom of speech is arguably part of the current wave of political backlash against the power of marginalised people, especially Black, Indigenous, and women of colour, queer, gender non-conforming and trans people, to generate public outcry against harmful individuals, and more generally shape the terms of cultural debate. As Roopika Risam has argued, the blame for so-called 'toxic' Twitter feminism was unsurprisingly placed on feminists of colour. However, I would argue that feminists, especially those of us of colour, are still not the wider society's dominant voices, despite the right-wing press' relentless pot-stirring regarding 'wokeness' and 'culture wars', all of which paint targets squarely on our anti-racist, intersectional feminist backs. Because we tend to be structurally disempowered, even the individuals who we have supposedly 'cancelled' – e.g. Hugo Schwyzer, Julie Bindel, Caitlin Moran, R. Kelly, JK Rowling, Aziz Ansari – are often still able to participate in public life, some very profitably, with many people speaking in their defence; while some may lose their employment, this is not always the case.

A closer examination of who actually has the ability to fully 'cancel' anyone reveals that it is a question of power. True cancellation – the ability to end someone's ability to participate in society – is actually a longstanding tool of the powerful: think excommunications from the Catholic Church, the voiding of a passport or right to citizenship, or the sentencing to life in prison. I am thinking today of the many Black women athletes currently being excluded from their sports at the whim of the rulemakers within their field: Sha'Carri Richardson being banned from participating in the Olympics for using cannabis, the International Gymnastics Federation altering their move rankings to narrow the lead that Simone Biles consistently holds over her competitors, and a number of African women – Christine Mboma, Beatrice Masilingi, Caster Semenya, Francine Niyonsaba and Margaret Wambui – whose dominance on the track is so feared that their bodies are closely policed by Olympic sporting authorities, such that they have been deemed 'ineligible for female classification' – a label that Tressie McMillan Cottom wryly remarked "could be the title of a history of Black Women in the West." Misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey and Trudy, defined as anti-Black racist misogyny, is deeply present in the supposed outrage against cancel culture. The mainstream and particularly the right-wing media stands far back when Black women are cancelled, but quickly stands behind anyone else.

The right to free speech comes with the responsibility of accountability, or being answerable for one's actions, including the thoughts, opinions and perspectives one presents in public spaces, including online. While I do not agree that the public takedown is the most effective or desirable form of accountability, when there are few other options, sometimes it will have to do.

Jillian C. York

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Mikhail Yakovlev: What do you understand by ‘cancel culture’ and does it pose threats to freedom of speech?

Jillian York: I think it’s helpful to differentiate ‘cancellation’ itself from cancel culture. Cancellation has a number of different definitions. We often conflate a bunch of ideas with this one term. And, that’s where I think ‘cancel culture’, which I see as kind of the culture in which rapid decisions and ‘pile-ons’ are made about people can be problematic as a cultural phenomenon.

By contrast, there are different ways of so-called cancelling. Some are more valid than others, while others can be really toxic.

Mikhail Yakovlev: Which ways of cancelling do you think may be valid?

Jillian York: The word “cancellation” has a history in Black American discourse and was, originally, as far as I understand it, used to express a social attitude – as a way of denouncing someone’s ideas as being racist or problematic in other ways. This is also how I saw it in the beginning of the ‘cancel’ discourse on Twitter. I think it’s a very valid way of using a term. It is critical. It is counter-speech.

I think another kind of conflation happens here around boycotts or ‘deplatforming’ . By deplatforming, I don’t mean students protesting against providing a certain speaker with a platform. That kind of boycott-style cancellation is also something that I don’t really have a problem with because it is a way of people to act against other people who have ideas that they don’t agree with.

It gets problematic when we conflate all of these things. For example, pile-ons that get somebody fired from their job may have a valid place when it comes to Nazis. But, I find them to be a less valid response to somebody’s tweets from 10 years ago.

We’ve seen it happen to minorities in a lot of cases, for example Sarah Jeong . ‘Pile-ons’ are often lacking in context, and nuance, and depth in a way that is troubling because, if we normalise this kind of behaviour, it will definitely come for other people who don’t deserve this sort of cancellation in the long run.

Mikhail Yakovlev: Then, do you think ‘cancel culture’ as a tag or label is being used to silence minorities and the oppressed?

Jillian York: This is why we need a lot more nuance around this conversation. The term ‘cancel culture’ is most often used by people on the right to silence genuine grievances.

But, that doesn’t mean we have to keep seeing things as a binary.

Just because this term is primarily used by the right to silence genuine discourse doesn’t mean that cancelling has no problematic aspects to it.

A lot of white people get really caught-up in essentialism, thinking that because a member of a minority groups has said something they must be right. While we want to make sure that we're not silencing minority voices, that doesn't mean staying silent about things that are toxic. Kanye West is a great example. Oprah is another. I have experienced pile-ons before for talking about how she has validated three really toxic men – Doctor Phil, Doctor Oz, and Rabbi Shmuley. Is she exempt from criticism because she's a Black woman? I don't think so. She's also a billionaire. Since when did we stop criticizing the wealthy and powerful?

Mikhail Yakovlev: Almost taking the opposed perspective, do you think that all speech has a right to be heard? And, should speech have consequences for the speaker?

Jillian York: I don't think that all speech has the right to be heard.

What I don't believe is authorities limiting speech, perhaps with a handful of narrow exceptions around incitement, like child sexual abuse.

At the same time, I definitely think there should be consequences for speech. I just believe that those should come from the people, not the state or a massive corporation like Facebook.

For example, JK Rowling absolutely deserves all of the criticism she's getting for what she said. But, if the state decided to come in and shut her up, I would have a real problem with that.

Mikhail Yakovlev: How can this be negotiated in print and broadcast media where even if there is no state involvement, there are still top-down editorial decisions?

Jillian York: For me, the advertiser-based business model is the problem. And, this is also true of social media. When you rely on ads, you are essentially ruled by corporations and this creates the biggest disincentives for free discourse.

Advertisers want to be 'family-friendly'. So, they pull their ads from anything to do with 'nudity', which has created the closure of discourse around gender, sexuality and sex.

Of course, we have also seen advertisers pull revenue from hateful conduct. That can be good. Still, I don't think advertiser boycotts really work in this day and age, because some advertisers will always support hateful ideas.

Going forward, we need to start looking at other business models.

Benjamin Cohen



Benjamin Cohen is a journalist and CEO of PinkNews . Twitter: @benjamincohen

Mikhail Yakovlev: What do you understand by cancel culture and do you think it poses a threat to freedom of speech?

Benjamin Cohen: It seems to mean different things to different people.

What I find most confusing is that people who complain about ‘cancel culture’ and the media that complain about cancel culture practice cancel culture the most. They are trying to cancel the beliefs of people who, for example, support trans rights.

By contrast, I don’t believe that the vast majority of us who would be in the group that gets described as ‘woke’ actually practice cancel culture. It is the group that complains about cancel culture that practice cancel culture the most.

Mikhail Yakovlev: Could you tell us how you see ‘cancel culture’ being weaponised to silence minorities in the media?

Benjamin Cohen: I have been running PinkNews for fifteen years and we have always highlighted inappropriate behaviour by people. In the past, it was not described as us practicing ‘cancel culture’, it was described as journalism. But, now, the kind of response from those who are called out and their supporters is – “you are trying to cancel us”.

But, I and PinkNews are not trying to cancel other people’s views. I definitely not have an issue with people thinking what they want. It is about the way people express themselves. If people express themselves in offensive ways, it is something we want to call out or report on. Equally, if someone is in public office or has a high profile, the things that they say or do have a greater impact on others.

Those who are opposed to this type of criticism describe it as ‘thought-policing’. But, we can’t even know what their internal thoughts are. What we can do is call someone out when they tweet or say something hateful. And, it is the right thing to do.

Of course, the whole social media ecosystem on this is confusing. Whenever, I am on Radio 4, for example, The Daily Mail has generally tried to cancel my views. Ironically, they are always accusing me of trying to cancel other people.

Ultimately, I think ‘cancel culture’ is an unhelpful term because, it doesn’t really mean anything. You cannot cancel someone else’s view. But, you can call it out.

Mikhail Yakovlev: Do you think that this term, which you describe as “meaningless”, has become so prevalent now because social media has removed some of the gatekeeping mechanisms that shielded those in position of power or privilege from criticism?

Benjamin Cohen: I think that the problem is that, in this era, people are held to account to a far greater level than they were before.

Another thing to bear in mind, all of this supposed ‘cancel culture’ is happening in Twitter echo chambers.

On my Twitter, this weekend, there was a lot of tweets about Whispa, because a gender-critical figure posted a very weird tweet, alluding to the notion that a Whispa chocolate bar was thrown into their garden with the intent of poisoning their dog with some involvement of trans people . Probably, 99% of people saw nothing about this issue, which is ultimately meaningless. But, if you were in whatever demographic Twitter decided would be interested in this stuff, everything you were seeing was about Whispa.

Even when a celebrity or a vaguely influential person is 'cancelled', that is heavily criticised, it may seem so important, but – in reality – it is not. If you are that person, everything appears magnified from your perspective, because you are seeing tweets criticising you every second, etc. But, it is only for an hour and, in any case, most of these tweets are coming from a few actual people. But, you being 'cancelled' is not really real. It just seems like that because of Twitter and because of the way certain sections of the press will pick it up and run with it. But, it is very different from being exposed for whatever you have done on the first page of The Times.

To give an example, people say that J.K. Rowling has been cancelled. But, they are continuing to do all the things they did before, perhaps even benefitting from the criticisms that have been made about them. Last year, Rowling still managed to publish a bestseller. Millions of people still follow them on social media.

That's the thing. If you have been cancelled, one would assume that nobody would ever hear from you again and that would be the end of you. But, it seems that anyone who complains about being cancelled – and, I would put myself in that bracket – seems to have more notoriety after, than before.

If you are being 'cancelled' by the 'woke left', particularly if you are gender-critical, you automatically seem to get a column in a national newspaper

We need to ask ourselves which media is broadcasting the views of the people who are supposedly doing the cancelling? PinkNews is one, but who else?

Eric Heinze



Eric Heinze (he/him) is an Author & Professor of Law and Humanities, Queen Mary University London . Twitter: @Eric_Heinze_ Latest book: Hate Speech and Democratic Citizenship.

Nowadays, this phrase ‘cancel culture’ is being thrown into all sorts of situations. Within academia, it has also known as ‘no platforming’, which pretty much denotes the same thing. It stands broadly for the idea that certain ideas are too offensive, or too provocative, or too dangerous to make a legitimate contribution to public discussion.

The assumption is that simply lending a platform to an idea, in which it can be aired and discussed, legitimises it. Of course, you can debate that proposition. For example, there is plenty of teaching of Nazism. But, I do not think that any teaching of Nazism in the West is designed to lend it legitimacy. When speakers are disinvited, ‘cancelled’, or have the platform withdrawn from them, it is because they are advocating certain ideas, as opposed to treating those ideas critically. Nobody objects to teaching Nazism because the assumption is that the teaching is critical throughout.

The outcome is that plenty of dangerous ideas can be discussed as long as they are being categorically rejected. But is that always sufficient?

To take one example, debates around transgender identity have been raging for the last few years. Some speakers who adhere to the so-called radical feminist view have been ‘cancelled’, disinvited . For those who adhere to this position or want to hear different arguments about the issue, this feels like unwarranted censorship. Within the academic community, that kind of censorship will inhibit open debate and research.

There are people who make the argument that, in the UK at least, universities are self-governing bodies that should be able to decide whom to invite, based on majority-opinion. But, in my own writing, I distinguish between democracy and majority sentiment. Democracy is not always a head count. There are all sorts of ideas that majorities do not like and, in many ways, majoritarianism can undermine democracy. You can take a majority vote after all opinions have been aired but if you simply exclude speakers because the majority doesn’t want to hear them, then you undermine democracy. It becomes antithetical to democracy if the majority can silence minorities. Minorities have always been a part of democracy and that includes minority opinions.

Universities have a public service function in protecting diversity. The problem is that if we allow speech against certain minority groups, it serves to exclude them. I think this is certainly true in non-democracies, where hateful speech can be detrimental to minority interests. Whether that’s true in a democracy is a far more complicated question. This is why I disagree with ‘no platforming’ or so-called cancelling.

In a democratic framework, what matters is how the conversation is structured. Again, I write a lot about this in my book . The key factor for me is not the content of speech. If you want to have controversial speakers, you should not decide whether to invite them based on their opinions. Rather the question should be – how is the conversation structured?

Above all, my argument is that every member of the campus community must have access to the discussion. If you are going to use a university campus, which is usually state-funded in Western Europe, then everyone in the campus community should be notified. Everybody should have the option to attend and there should always be opportunities for cross-examination. This should not be hard because most academic conferences are already structured this way.

Nevertheless, in the past, we have sometimes had problems with hate preachers, who were invited to speak but nobody knew about the invitation. It wasn't always clear who had done the inviting, and the campus community was never notified. Again, the response was simply to ban hate preachers – to look at the content. This is not the way to do it. Allow them to come, but ensure that their talk is properly advertised and everyone has the opportunity for genuine participation and questioning.

If it is done that way, a lot of them will just not come. They will censor themselves. And, if they do come then they can be challenged about their views. Take another example. It's very rare to see high corporate executives, in particular from companies like Monsanto or Lockheed Martin, companies that do controversial things, speak at university campuses. I am sure they would love to do so, but as long as they know they may be cross-examined about their corporate conduct, they prefer to stay away entirely.

Charlotte Galpin



Dr Charlotte Galpin (she/her) is a Senior Lecturer in German and European Politics, University of Birmingham Department of Political Science and International Studies . Her research is concerned with European identities, EU citizenship, Euroscepticism and the European public sphere

As part of the Jean Monnet Network Post-Truth Politics, Nationalism and the (De-)Legitimation of European Integration I am working on a project on post-truth politics and the Brexit debates. Specifically, I am interested in the way in which academics, particularly women, queer people and people of colour, are targeted with abuse and harassment in gendered and racialised ways. I draw on my own experiences of public engagement, having been attacked by a tabloid newspaper and its readers after speaking publicly on prospects for a post-Brexit UK.

While tabloid and social media abuse is and can be targeted at anyone, research shows that such practices are unequally distributed. Women politicians – especially those of colour – receive the bulk of social media abuse directed at politicians, and women and queer people receive abuse that is deeply gendered and misogynistic. We cannot ignore the role of power in questions about free speech and silencing. In many cases, those who allege that they have been ‘cancelled’ or had their free speech curtailed are doing so from a privileged platform.

The problem with debates about ‘post-truth’ and ‘cancel culture’, is that these terms imply that there was once a golden age of ‘truth’ or unlimited free speech that never truly existed. What we need to remember is that the public sphere has always involved exclusion and marginalisation. The question is: what, if anything, is different in the current moment? Many of these debates around so-called ‘cancel culture’ involve marginalised and minoritized people demanding inclusion and respect and the freedom to exist free of abuse and violence in ways that would not have been possible before. Social media has brought with it a lot of negatives for democracy in terms of online abuse and disinformation, but it has also created new opportunities for participation, mobilisation and resistance for marginalised groups. Such demands for inclusion are then met with backlash and resistance from more powerful actors.

Frankie Morgan



Frankie Morgan (she/her) is a PhD Researcher, University of Birmingham and a committee member of the Graduate Centre for Europe. She researches feminist visual cultures on social media.

The text below is an edited transcription of the embedded video.

Mikhail Yakovlev: I would like to start by asking you very broadly, what do you understand by cancel culture and could it pose a threat to freedom of speech?

Frankie Morgan: I think there is a need for nuance when we talk about cancel culture. It is definitely a term that gets thrown around a lot, especially recently to the extent that it has somewhat become meaningless. So it has become this catch all term used to refer to everything from calling out criticism, opposition calls for accountability, expressions of concern all the way through to shaming and online abuse. Some of the questions I'm interested in are 'what does it mean to be cancelled when so many people who have claimed to experience it continue to have power and influence?' 'How do we 'measure or determine when a cancellation has occurred?'

I recently saw the term 'uncancelled' used to refer to people like Kevin Spacey - men who are making a comeback after accusations of sexual violence. Does this suggest that they were never, in fact, cancelled in the first place? The terminology surrounding uncancelled is quite interesting.

I also think we need to be quite wary of using the term cancel culture within feminist and activist communities, especially when referring to internal division as it risks reinforcing a particular narrative that positions privileged and powerful people who have done harmful or problematic things as the victim of this form of online mob.

Is there a need for kind of re framing how we talk about cancel culture or this internal division within feminist communities? Joe Freeman conceptualized it as trashing in 1976, which shows that it is not really this new phenomenon, and it is not really the kind of product of social media that it is often perceived to be. These issues relating to controversial speakers on university campuses is an issue that is going back decades. So we need to look at it – it is part of longer history.

Then it is also often framed as a generational issue, especially within feminist communities. This real second wave versus fourth wave narrative, which furthers this oppositional perspective obscures intergenerational collaboration. This particularly happens with trans issues and intersectionality. This rhetoric surrounding cancel culture creates an impression that these would have never previously been a point of contention when it is certainly not the case; and it can be used to trivialize the concerns of younger feminist activists. Opposition, division, and conflict within feminism has always been a part of feminism, right from the female fight for female suffrage, and it will be a part of feminist activism. I think it is quite inevitable.

This is the way I think about cancel culture as a term in the rhetoric more broadly and in relation to feminist issues in particular.

Mikhail Yakovlev: I was wondering whether you have any thoughts about how the dynamics changed or didn't change with social media, especially in terms of which voices now have the ability to be heard to not be heard?

Frankie Morgan: It's quite interesting what social media brings into it. I think in some ways, obviously, it gives everyone the access and the ability to put their views on a public platform - whether those views necessarily get heard is a different matter - but it does give people the ability to share their views publicly, and even to directly address public figures, celebrities, politicians via Twitter.

I think it's quite important to think of social media as a space in which speech happens rather than as this non-space. So it's necessary to think about all these interactions within this space of social media. It has given people who are typically silenced or marginalized the ability to forge a platform and have these kind of activist tools at hand. For example, calling people out or expressing criticism of people. But it's also necessary to understand that the same power dynamics that exist in wider society are still the case on social media. So, people who are white privileged and experience all those layers of different privilege, they are more likely to be heard compared to those who are more marginalized.

I also think a lot about the issue of echo chambers and how that intersects with the issue of cancel culture.

People seem to think that social media perhaps has eradicated debate and eradicated actual productive discussion and I think that does happen within specific echo chambers. What doesn't happen is that crossing over the Earth, those boundaries, the debate and discussion happening across the political spectrum or across communities, or echo chambers and how come the social media facilitates that kind of polarization and division in some aspects.

I think there's also a tendency to think of social media as this bastion of free speech. Like it's a space where free speech happens; speech is kind of unrestricted and unlimited, when, in reality, these are privately owned companies and they do have the ability to restrict the content shared on their platforms and they put in place community guidelines and standards which say that this content will be taken down. I mean they don't always necessarily do that fairly and they don't always necessarily do it effectively, but it is a power that they do have.

So the issues surrounding free speech and cancel culture really come to the fore because of the way these platforms are created and how they facilitate speech but also the ways in which they can restrict it in certain ways.

Mikhail Yakovlev: One thing that I wanted to ask you is on this idea that social media companies are able to police our speech. It has been a debate for quite a long time and from the evidence that we get it's usually not the people who say that they have been cancelled that actually do get cancelled by social media - or some exceptions like Trump after he has obviously already incited an actual riot then when he got cancelled. But a lot of the time it seems that the way social media want them - algorithms and in person monitoring and sort of censorship works is just censoring voices that are already marginalized. I just wanted to ask, to what extent would you agree with the fact that cancel culture is almost weaponized to keep those voices silenced and marginalized, because obviously the terms cancel and cancelled come from Black American subculture of the 70s and 80s? But because these people who use the term are removed from mainstream media; through gatekeeping, which still happens in offline media, do you think that perhaps the whole cancel culture hysteria is all about, marginalized voices, ethnic, and racial minority voices or trans voices now actually having a platform to speak? And you know those people like Guardian journalists for example, who write transphobic content, they can no longer speak without being challenged?

Frankie Morgan: I definitely think as a brief point, the Community guidelines and standards that are put in place, supposedly to make these platforms safer and more of a community can disproportionately impact women, women of colour, sex workers more marginalized groups and the content that they put out there and doesn't necessarily have the same impact on those who are targeting those groups or abusing those groups. An interesting point is that women, trans people, people of colour are so often targeted on social media with abuse, even though those same groups are the ones quite often accused of being the opponents of cancel culture - feminists and trans activists are [accused of] restricting free speech when in reality these are the ones being abused and silenced on these platforms in a way that is making them lose a sense of themselves because they feel like they are unable to speak publicly because of the backlash that they often face.

I think that this kind of cancel culture rhetoric can really trivialize and dismiss the activism of certain communities, particularly younger generations. This idea of political correctness gone mad, the snowflake generation, social justice warriors, fuels this notion of clicktivism whilst also labelling these younger generations as apathetic. It's this weird dichotomy and this is furthered by how quite often these discussions of cancel culture are centred on these clickbait issues for headlines that the vast majority of activists aren't concerned with as it obscures their politics. This happens so often with feminist and trans activists in relation to gender-neutral language. This kind of idea, that we can't call them mansize tissues anymore, because, the feminists, won't let you. I think in reality these activists are concerned with much larger and greater issues than these. It helps to further this idea that you can be cancelled for really trivial things, when in reality, feminist communities in particular are just really trying to hold people who've been able to act with impunity for so long accountable #metoo being an example of this. Call out culture was used to try and hold accountable people who have been committing acts of sexual violence for decades and in some cases were able to get away with it forcing people to be silenced. I think we should be able to hold people accountable without it being labelled as kind of cancel culture or toxic as it frames the one being cancelled as the victim rather than the people that community who are hurt by that individual's actions in the first place. We should be able to stop supporting people who've done horrific things - largely in the case of feminism these are acts of sexual violence - without being attacked or shamed for cancelling someone.

I think there's also the ability for call out or cancel culture - whatever term gets used - to be an effective tool of activism. For example, the hashtag #muteRKelly is an example that I think of as what could broadly be understood as an act of cancel culture, which was designed to hold R Kelly accountable because he had been able to act for so long without being held accountable. So stop playing his music; Stop supporting him; all off the trying to get him off radios; off streaming services. But it isn't often thought of as cancel culture because it doesn't fit into this rhetoric. And then there's also examples which challenge this rhetoric of cancel culture. So #cancelKavanaugh is one which was in response to Brett Kavanaugh, the Supreme Court Justice nomination being accused of sexual assault. In reality the fact that he was nominated and confirmed to the Supreme Court, challenges this narrative that white men are the victims of this cancel culture.

In relation to this idea of it being used in a way that silences minorities this rhetoric in particular, rather than the actual act, creates this fear that you can be cancelled for anything you say. So using the wrong terminology results in this self-censorship or self-silencing. However, as I previously said, education and dialogue and calling in, which is a term promoted by Loretta Ross, are a common occurrence within these communities when people make mistakes or ask questions surrounding these issues so it isn't this thing of where you say the wrong thing and you're instantly cancelled. I think feminists are trying to use these tools that social media has given them to try and hold people who've been able to act without consequences for so long accountable.

Mikhail Yakovlev: I want to pick up on the last thing you said: this idea that certain people have been able to act in a very questionable, immoral or apparent way for so long without any consequences. If we think about balancing individual rights of freedom of speech and the consequences of that speech, do you think all speech has the right to be heard and should speech have consequences for the speaker and what kind of consequences would you envisage?

Frankie Morgan: I think the issue of freedom of speech is a really interesting one because it's quite often used as a kind of justification for things, which can be understood as hate speech in certain instances. It's used as this defence in some ways, and freedom of speech does not mean freedom of consequence, nor does it mean freedom from criticism, and it also doesn't mean that everyone has to listen to what everyone is saying which seems to be this kind of desire, sometimes to have free speech without criticism or without backlash. I think you have to acknowledge that when you are expressing your views in a public space as you are on social media, that is going to be that kind of criticism and there is going to be that backlash if people disagree with you and that is kind of how public discourse has happened throughout time. But also, social media creates a kind of broader space in which you're not just in an individual room in a specific time and location, but the [number of] people that can see what you're writing is much greater. So the opportunity for criticism and backlash is also much greater.

I think it's difficult with social media, I think because it is held as this space of free speech, like I said in reality, that's not the case and it yet, whilst it does give those who are marginalized or silenced, the ability to share their thoughts and have a platform in certain ways, it's also a space which is used to silence those who are marginalized, largely and it's framed that those who are powerful and those who are influential are the ones that are being silenced by these kind of online mobs.

When in reality social media silencing and [the restriction of] the freedom of speech that happens on social media is largely happening against women and more marginalized groups, people of colour and trans activists. So reframing it in a way that we understand that white men on the right are not necessarily the victims of this online mob, when in reality the impact of restrictions to freedom of speech that happens on social media is largely to those who have historically been silenced and historically have been marginalized. This is how we can create a space in which that isn't the case, particularly tackling issues surrounding online abuse, which forces this self-silencing and self-censorship.

Notes, Resources and References

This is a list of resources that were hyperlinked in the online version of the interviews

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