

The Platformisation of Cancel Culture

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Abstract

Cancel culture claims, narratives and practices now play out in predominantly platformed spaces, spanning from progressive publics and accountability practices to reactionary/anti-woke/far right publics. We argue that platform affordances, architectures and cultures serve as a nodal point to bring together a disparate set of practices, discourses and ideological positions to facilitate polarized, reactionary, and or strategic networked publics in the context of digital politics and the (re) emergence of culture wars. Papers within this special issue speak to our argument in varying ways. They explore the mechanisms, sentiments, tolerances, and practices in local and global contexts. They consider how certain practices manifesting as social justice interventions apply to negatively impact marginalized groups, theorize the role of and power of platforms in propelling cancelations, and track the rituals associated with cancel culture on platforms. In doing so we encompass perspectives and case studies from the global majority to inform what has to date been a largely Western area of focus and scholarship.

Keywords

cancel culture, platforms, networked publics, social media, anti-woke, social justice

Introduction

In 2021, two Catholic Churches in Canada were subject to arson. These acts came amid reports of more than 1,000 unmarked graves of indigenous children being recovered from sites of Canada's former residential schools. British Columbia Civil

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Liberties Association (BCCLA) Executive Director Harsha Walia shared the news on Twitter (as it then was), tweeting “burn it all down” (LJB WTF (@ljb879) 2021). There was a swift and substantial online backlash on the same platform. Calls for Walia’s resignation were accompanied by critiques that she was making a literal call for violence and stoking hatred (Little 2021). Involved in anti-colonial and anti-capitalist migrant justice movements for the past two decades (Walia 2021a), Walia clarified that “burn it all down” was not a proposition of literal burning but rather a “very common phrase - that is, a call to dismantle all structures of violence including the state, settler-colonialism, empire, the border etc” (Walia 2021b). Her point was that “deadly genocidal colonialism locally and globally needs to collapse” (Walia 2021c). Despite clarifying her purpose in calling out Canada’s colonialist legacy, Walia was subject to many critiques including personal attacks that were rife with misogyny and racism (Walia 2021d). Walia was ultimately pushed to resign her Executive Director role at the BCCLA (CBC News 2021).

In what appears to be the mirror image of Walia’s experience, Scott Adams, the creator of the US comic strip Dilbert, was “canceled” when in February 2023 he referred to Black people as a “hate group” and remarked that white people should “get the hell away from Black people” (CBS News 2023). As with Walia, the response was swift: The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, the USA Today Network and other newspapers stopped publishing Dilbert, while Penguin Random House decided to drop the publication of Adams’ book (Picchi 2023). This cancellation, according to Adams, led to an 80 percent drop in his income (Cavna and Chery 2023), though his overall net worth is calculated to be around €75 million (Beschizza, 2023). Adams’ comic strip has now found a new home in Rumble, an Alt Tech platform that describes itself as “immune to cancel culture” (Pavlovski 2023). He has over 1 million followers on Twitter/X and his YouTube live streams, where he had originally aired his comments, have tens of thousands of views each. In August 2023, Adams self-published the book Penguin dropped, *Reframe your Brain*, which in late August 2023 was ranking #9 in Amazon Books. It does not seem that his “cancellation” has resulted either in his silencing or in losing his livelihood.

Frawley (2023) observes that during Scott Adams’ downfall, his Twitter posts, which typically got a few thousand views, ended up getting over a million, attracting both those defending and those attacking him, as well as curious onlookers, watching from the sides. Since platforms rely on views, comments and reactions, it is evident that such controversies are not necessarily bad for (platform) business. Indeed, some influencers have turned cancel culture into a business opportunity for staying relevant. For example, the influencer and YouTuber Logan Paul has a history of cancellations going back to 2017, when he posted a vlog from Japan’s “suicide forest,” showing uncensored footage of a man who had apparently died by suicide (Jones 2023). This video led to YouTube dropping him from their Google Preferred advertising tier. He then embarked on a series of apologies, creating more and more content and attracting a crowd of supporters, detractors and onlookers. Since then, he has been involved in several cycles of controversy, cancellation, and apology, each gaining more notoriety and followers. Similarly, Shane Dawson, another YouTuber, was “canceled” several

times for racist, misogynist and other kinds of offensive and insensitive content, but he still managed to hold on to and even grow his subscribers to 21 million (Hall 2020).

We consider these three examples as illustrations of cancel culture as a concept, practice and ideological flashpoint that now plays out in predominantly digital spaces dominated by platforms. In this special issue we seek not only to redress gaps in scholarly understanding of the mechanisms and impacts of cancel culture on users and discursive scripts online, but also to theorize, identify and describe more concisely some of the practices associated with cancel culture events. As a starting point, we rely on Ng's (2022, 1) recent, rich and useful definition of cancel culture as "comprising both cancel practices (canceling) that involve actions against a cancel target, which may be an individual, brand, or company, and cancel discourses, which is commentary about canceling." In particular, we consider this definition both in reference to cancel culture's historical subversion from a space of "useful anger" (D. Clark 2020) for vulnerabilised communities and in terms of its association with regressive voices and oppressive claims. More than anything, we view cancel culture as a complex terrain where power struggles are played out, where every case appears to have far more at stake than the individuals concerned and their actions. Crucially, questions of power and the direction(s) it flows take a central position in our interrogations of cancel culture. In these flows of power, the mediation of cancel culture by digital platforms, and their internal architectures, including affordances and algorithms, cannot be ignored as an important factor, a *sine qua non*, in the emergence and operation of cancel culture.

While therefore Walia's "call out" of violent power structures led to her career effectively being "canceled," Scott Adams and Logan Paul were propped up by and enjoyed much success across platforms. These examples speak to the central argument of this article and this special issue more broadly: that cancel culture operationalizes in digital spaces across varying platforms as a nodal point that brings together a disparate set of practices, discourses and ideological positions. In making this argument, we contend that cancel culture in digital spaces is a complex terrain where power struggles are played out and that digital platforms, including their internal architecture, their platform affordances, and algorithmic cultures are an important facet in how cancel culture has emerged in digital spaces. While the outcome of calls to cancel is by no means guaranteed, in the current conjuncture, cancel culture appears to have morphed to something approximating a policing discourse, looking less and less like a call for accountability and more and more like an effort to control the boundaries of what can be said, how and by whom. Expanding on these arguments, this introduction will first provide a brief conceptualization of cancel culture and a discussion of some of its key dynamics and power flows, before summarizing the contributions to the special issue.

Conceptualizing Cancel Culture: Platforms, Actors and Power Flows

Almost 20 years have passed since Time Magazine famously selected "You," the user, as the person of the year 2006. Much has been written about the ways in which affective networked publics connect and act on and through social media platforms

(Boyd 2010; Papacharissi 2015). This bottom up political power claimed by networked publics is inextricably linked to platforms and their affordances. Finding like-minded people through hashtags and viral contents, ephemeral, loosely connected networks articulate strong political views and catalyze social change. Two important movements of the 2010s, #metoo and #BlackLivesMatter, are emblematic of this networked power to demand social change. Yet not much has changed since the launch of these movements despite their promises (Mendes et al. 2018). These networked publics are also at the forefront of cancel culture, carrying forward some of the ambiguities associated with hashtag activism and network politics in digital spaces, including their ephemerality and transience, their focus on individuals rather than deep structural change, the ways in which they feed into platform logics, and the ease by which they get usurped by reactionary political groupings (see e.g., Dadas 2017; Haber 2019; Kavada and Poell 2021; Yüce and Çatalbaş 2023). At the same time, the post-Covid world has seen an exacerbation of polarized views, conspiracy theories, and widespread reactionary backlash to the progressivism of #Metoo, #BLM and related movements across the world.

In the imaginary of cancel culture, we may therefore schematically think of the actors in cancel culture not only as ad hoc network publics driven by progressive values but also as including polarized, reactionary, strategic publics. And straddling across these publics we can locate the meta-discourses on cancel culture, the various commentaries, interventions, and analyses, that seek to explain, interpret and evaluate cancel culture. In the imaginary of cancel culture, polarized publics engaged in cancellation and counter cancellation observed by a public that positions itself as rational, as having common sense, and as commenting and evaluating these actions, but which nevertheless feeds into cancel culture practices. But these publics and discourses, progressive, centrist or reactionary, do not act in a neutral environment; rather, their actions are shaped by, and in turn shape, the digital environment in which they are performed. Platforms are therefore also themselves actors in cancel culture - both indirectly, through their affordances and algorithms, and directly, through mostly automated content moderation and recommendation practices. The tensions, oppositions and occasional alignment between platforms, networked publics and meta-discourses can be seen as giving form to cancel culture.

In particular, cancel culture at the very least represents a withdrawal (and/or calls for withdrawal) of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, career consequences, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic (Bouvier 2020; Ng 2020). There is a sequence of events in cancellation that include a trigger, often in the form of a media event, and a target. The more profound a trigger event, the more likely a cancellation practice is to occur. Duque et al. (2021) refer to violent confrontations and activist deaths as the seed for the contemporary expression of cancel culture. The target is often a prominent figure; however, notoriety is not required for cancellation practices. A “discursive script” of cancel discourses evolves in response to the trigger where actors (increasingly platform users acting as networked publics) discursively shape and contextualize the event.

Cancellation thus exists, as Frawley (2023, 5) explains, as a grand “carnavalesque spectacle of denunciation,” requiring public rituals of repentance that mirror pre-modern rituals designed to elicit obedience to kings. In cancel culture, these feudal exercises are disbanded and power is instead claimed by groups of individuals in response to aberrations from accepted (or occasionally from aspirational) norms. As Nakamura describes, canceling someone is a form of “cultural boycott” and cancel culture is the “ultimate expression of agency” which is “born of a desire for control [as] people have limited power over what is presented to them on social media” and a need for “accountability which is not centralized” (Nakamura, qtd. In Bromwich 2018). “Canceling” in some scholars’ views is therefore 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 (D. Clark 2020).

These views conceptualize cancel culture as a progressive call for accountability, mobilized in a quest for justice and recognition. In particular, Clark (2020) first connected cancel culture’s conceptual roots in the Black vernacular tradition as derived from the social media term “call out.” Call out culture, Clark argues, operated as an application of useful anger by vulnerabilised people and groups. However, cancel culture in its current iterations instead represents a misappropriation of these earlier culturally linked networks for different purposes. For Clark, cancel culture has been effectively harnessed in platform spaces as a strategy for networked framing of extant social problems by those in power. The result is that there are many ways that cancel culture has been hijacked out of “usefully angry” and socially productive political discourses of vulnerabilised communities and then subverted into virtue-signaling social media influence or conservative claims of censorship by progressives and “politically correct/woke” thought-policing. Thus, as Norris (2023) describes, a trend for discourses in recent years where claims of “cancel culture” are made by right-wing politicians and commentators, is a form of silencing of alternative perspectives and also of eviscerating robust intellectual debate. Norris explains how claims of cancellation are being deployed as rhetorical dog whistles devoid of substantive meaning; they are myths to fire up sectarian political factions and to distract from real-world problems. It is in this context, for example, that we can position commentary such as this letter, signed by among others Noam Chomsky and JK Rowling, positing that cancel culture reflects “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” (Harper’s Magazine 2020).

For progressive publics therefore cancel culture presents important dilemmas and has had questionable outcomes, as calls for accountability deteriorate into policing discourses. As Judith Butler argues in discussing language, and in particular terms surrounding gender, this effort “is not about policing. I don’t think we should become the police. I’m afraid of the police. But I think a lot of people feel that the world is out of control, and one place where they can exercise some control is language. And it seems like moral discourse comes in then: Call me this. Use this term” (Butler 2024, n.p.). While Butler strives for understanding what lies beneath these calls for

accountability, Phelan (2023) argues that cancel culture is deeply anti-political, because it operates from a position of moral certainty, closing off alternative possibilities, experiences and interpretations of identities and positions. This closing off ends up compromising the productive antagonism that is inherent in politics favoring instead a conflictual polarization that feeds into what Mbembe calls a “society of enmity” (Mbembe 2019: 1 cited in Phelan 2023, 11). From this point of view, cancel culture cannot achieve the progressive goals of justice and equality, and is bound to exacerbate polarities of “them” and “us.”

It is no wonder therefore that cancel culture has fitted so well with the rising reactionary and far right politics. It is important to contextualize cancel culture within the current socio-political conjuncture, and in particular within the increasingly polarized and polarizing culture wars, defined as the politicization of values and morality (Hunter 1992). The shift toward the politicization of culture has been theorized as part of a far right or reactionary Gramscism, which aims to create a hegemony of traditionalist, ultra-conservative ideologies and values (Griffin 2000). This struggle for (conservative) hegemony plays out in digital media and cancel culture is inextricably caught up in these politics. Despite the roots of cancel culture in progressive activism, it is currently embroiled in culture wars, often driven by strategic actors of the reactionary right. These actors are engaged in cancel culture in a dual way: firstly, as Donald Trump himself put it in 2020, decrying cancel culture as “the very definition of totalitarianism” (cited in Phelan 2023, 2); and secondly, as instigators of cancellation themselves, as we have seen in the example of Harsha Walia or in attempts to “cancel” brands such as Bud Light for showing support for LGBTQ communities (Cheddar Berk, Christina 2023). In both, we can locate their success less in the outcome of individual cases and more in the overall climate created by constant criticism of even the mildest calls for accountability, especially if they come from feminist, anti-racist or LGBTQ voices. Ultimately, these attacks silence such voices and delegitimise their claims (Steel 2023).

Platforms

In strategically mobilizing cancel culture far right actors rely on and seek to adapt their practices to the digital environment. But, as we noted earlier, far from being neutral, platforms are actors with a stake in the process. On the one hand, platforms benefit from cancel culture insofar as its spectacles and controversies create more and more content, feeding into what Dean (2005) calls communicative capitalism. On the other hand, platforms are themselves responsive to public demands, as they do not want to alienate their users and advertisers. They can therefore act in ways that parallel cancel culture. Indeed, deplatforming (Rogers 2020) can be seen as cancellation enacted by platforms, while content moderation policies control the flow of circulation of content in ways that can effectively cancel some content producers (Are 2022).

Expanding on the role of platforms, it is crucial to note that they create an attention economy, through their algorithms and design features that structure visibility and direct users (Bucher 2012). This has been theorized as a design feature, an affordance

(Bucher and Helmond 2017), which is linked to changes in the activist practices of political groups and ultimately in the way in which users behave and in turn act upon their digital environment. The rise of influencers, some of whom operate as ideological entrepreneurs (Finlayson 2022) can be seen as the direct outcome of a combination of platform design features and algorithms and user-led practices, that are geared toward capturing attention (Tufekci 2013). This commodified attention can in turn be capitalized both by these influencers and by platforms themselves (Ørmen and Gregersen 2023). When therefore an influencer such as Logan Paul gets involved in controversies and “platform drama” the result is a monetized spectacle (Lewis and Christin 2022). Similarly, Shane Dawson, another YouTuber, was “canceled” several times for racist, misogynist and other kinds of offensive and insensitive content, but he still managed to hold on and even grow his subscribers to 21 million who continued to seek out this type of content (Hall 2020). Bozzi (in this issue) discusses the “uncancelability” of Joe Rogan, who seems to be too big to cancel. The commodification of attention and the monetized spectacles of cancellation afforded by platforms have important political ramifications: as ideological entrepreneurs increasingly rely on building a “brand” and producing more and more content to keep their followers interested, they are incentivized to engage in cancel culture callouts and criticisms of “wokeness” (Phelan 2023; Siapera 2023). Cancel culture practices by far right or anti-woke influencers are, in these terms, the result of this combination of platform-structured visibility and the attention economy with making a living out of promoting a political world view. Platforms are therefore not merely an actor in cancel culture but a chief enabler of these kinds of practices.

At the same time, platforms are interested in retaining control over the contents their users generate. They can be responsive to user criticism and when controversy threatens to affect relationships with advertisers, platforms can be quick to act. Typically, their reactions take the form of deplatforming and content demotion, known as shadow banning. These practices differ from cancel culture as we conceptualized it above, as they do not originate with networked publics but are driven by platform themselves. However, they feed directly into cancel culture in the wider sense of commentary on cancel culture. Deplatforming can refer both to the time when platforms engaged in mass removal of accounts of far right actors, precipitated by events such as the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally and the Capitol riots in the US, and in the practice of removing individual accounts when community guidelines are repeatedly breached. As a historical event, the mass deplatforming began around 2018 and culminated in the removal of Donald Trump’s account in 2021 (Rauchfleisch and Kaiser 2021; Rogers 2020). It resulted not only in the emergence of Alt Tech platforms (Donovan et al. 2019) but also in the development of a narrative of persecution that features very prominently in far right discourses. In such narratives, deplatforming is seen as part of cancel culture and the result of mainstream wokeness and the dominance of liberal ideologies (Jasser et al. 2023). Content demotion, or shadow banning, is an elusive process whereby platforms demote content, that is, they do not show it in people’s feeds. This typically happens when content is considered to be borderline, not quite breaching the rules but coming close. Because platforms do not necessarily

inform users that their content is demoted, there is a lot of speculation around it, feeding directly into the narratives of persecution and censorship that the far right likes to peddle, even though most studies show that marginalized communities are more likely to experience shadow banning (Are 2022; Middlebrook 2020). Both deplatforming and shadow banning reveal the control that platforms exert over contents while feeding into the “folklore” surrounding cancel culture and into the creation of narratives of persecution subsequently instrumentalised by the far right.

In this discussion we have situated cancel culture in the context of digital politics, networked publics and the (re)emergence of culture wars. We focused on two kinds of networked publics: progressive publics involved in what they construe as accountability practices and reactionary/anti-woke/far right publics that are involved in pushbacks against progressives and in decrying cancel culture as a form of censorship. For the political goals associated with progressive publics, cancel culture is profoundly ambivalent because it operates as a policing discourse and, if we follow Phelan (2023), because of its anti-political character that seeks to close off ambiguity and antagonism. For reactionary publics, in contrast, cancel culture seems to work to their advantage, because on the one hand they can weaponise it to attack progressives and on the other hand they benefit from denouncing it as antithetical to core democratic values. We highlighted the important role played by platforms that create a market for cancel culture (cf Phelan 2023) and enable ideological entrepreneurs to extract profit from their involvement in spectacles of cancellation. And we discussed how platform practices such as deplatforming and shadow banning feed into far right narratives of persecution. Far from a tool in the hands of the oppressed, cancel culture plays straight into the hands of the far right and its metapolitical quest for cultural hegemony. We therefore consider cancel culture as reflecting and realigning antagonisms between progressive and reactionary publics in a digital environment that is structured by platforms and their economic priorities and commodification of attention, publicness and even politics itself, as lasade-anderson and Sobande illustrate in the present issue.

While we believe that this account captures the main dynamics of contemporary practices of cancel culture, these by no means predict the outcome of particular instances, as a number of other factors are at play at the same time. Indeed, contributions to this issue offer a nuanced and complicated account of how those in danger of cancellation develop practices aimed to deflect cancellation, how cancel culture is involved in, and emerges out of, process of identity construction and alignment or becomes itself a tool for reactionary publics demanding accountability by their own leaders. Moreover, our account here focuses on how these dynamics play out in the context of Western politics and platforms. It may well be that cancel culture operates in different ways in regions where political divisions take different forms. Some of the contributions to the special issue identify and outline parallels and divergences in how cancel culture is deployed in different national and political contexts. The next section presents all these articles in more detail.

This special issue. Papers within this special issue speak to our argument in varying ways and respond to our initial sets of questions exploring mechanisms, sentiments,

tolerances, practices in local and global contexts. The special issue teases out further the ways certain practices manifesting as social justice interventions apply to negatively impact marginalized groups in politically regressive ways. It theorizes the role of and power of platforms in propelling cancelations and tracks the rituals that have become associated with cancel culture. In doing so it encompasses perspectives and case studies from the global majority to inform what has to date been a largely Western area of focus and scholarship.

First this special issue explores the dynamics and practices of cancellation enacted by what Jin and Bouvier describe as “trigger-ready” interest groups. Referring to the widely covered 2022 domestic abuse/defamation trial of Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, Jin and Bouvier examine a sample of Twitter hashtags where there were calls to cancel Depp or Heard. Using multimodal discourse analysis, they found that hashtags become an entanglement of vaguely articulated discourses relating to specific subjects. While the process is heterogeneous and fragmented, trigger-ready interest groups join into a singular flow of outrage directed at the perceived perpetrator, whose individual identity and specific circumstances become set aside in the process. “Discursive scripts” of cancellation shape or “recontextualize” the identities and actions that the interest groups claim to represent.

Jin and Bouvier’s research illustrates how a clearly heterogeneous set of views is able to imagine a unified “we” in respect to a trigger event and the range of cancel events it potentiates. Heterogeneous issues and motivations coalesce and form a sense of collective mobilization. The outrage produced by the entanglement leads to an extreme moral position where complete purification of public space is demanded. Similarly, White describes how a group can connect online around shared sentiment. However, White clarifies that this moral position, while it can manifest as “ethical” cancellation, in fact can elide intolerant systems and sustain norms which are misogynistic in character. Closely reading the content and reportage around the Try Guys’ “what happened” Youtube video, which narrates their cancellation of colleague Ned Fulmer because of an extra-marital relationship with an employee, White’s findings contradict earlier literature which suggests cancel culture offers disempowered individuals and groups methods of identifying and correcting hateful practices. They argue that cancel culture functions by engaging in “direct addresses with feelings”; and appropriating the concept of cancellation as a vessel to further shared sentiments of intolerance and brand promotion.

This theme of appropriation and sustained intolerant norms is also described by Reinhard who looks at the subversion of cancel-culture activism by contemporary anti-queer parental rights activists into online campaigns that rationalize “cancellation” of queer public visibility. Reinhard describes how these activists use social media in U.S. education debates to amplify pejorative terms misapplied to queerness in order to produce new stereotypes about queer people. Crucially, this anti-queerness also showcases the embedded logics of Jin and Bouvier’s described “extreme morality”; here, Reinhard connects these anti-queer cancellation efforts to older histories of cancel-culture by drawing upon the moralizing language of child protectionism that emerged within Civil Rights debates of the 1970s. The affective rhetoric produced by these

campaigns demonstrates how anti-queer activists have appropriated the social justice origins of cancel culture online within the current anti-LGBTQ+ backlash.

However, cancellation in its contemporary form appears to extend beyond these trends of effecting extreme morality and appropriating ethical cancellation practices to silence vulnerabilised communities. Indeed, discourses are emerging online which seek to either hold ideologues to their conservative position or to further benefit these ideologues from the culture war narratives attached to cancellation. Marinus Jurg, Tuters, and Picone have examined the ways in which canceling practices occur within reactionary communities where engaged fans hold conservative ideological entrepreneurs accountable for their adherence to the political canon. Adopting a fan studies perspective, they used “close” and “distant” readings on 1.8 million comments from the now-canceled “The Alex Jones Channel” on YouTube. Focusing on Jones’ recantation of the “Sandy Hook Hoax” following financial pressures, the authors show that, akin to traditional fandoms, radical and conservative audiences engaged in call-out practices demanding “character” and “canon” fidelity. In parallel, Bozzi describes how, the removal of reactionary voices like Joe Rogan from large social media platforms can have the unintended effect reinforcing these ideologue’s brand as an embedded and *uncancellable* skeptic. This *uncancellability* becomes a brand which the ideologues profit from.

Going deeper into the politics of cancellation, Kim details the nature of appropriation and progressive backlash in South Korea. She describes how this backlash can be anti-feminist as a reaction to changing gender power relations. In posing this argument, she examines the 2021 canceling of a JaeJae, a South Korean YouTube producer and TV personality over their use of a gesture associated with a feminist community online. She traced the scope of practices of antifeminist cancel culture within and beyond subcultural industries to broader commercial companies, governmental agencies, and public institutions over the years. In South Korea, cancel culture has led to the removal of advertising and the issuing of sanctions against the individuals identified in the accusations. Given this, Kim argues that the co-optation and the success of antifeminist cancel culture have resulted from shifts in gender power relations, the production of discourse supportive of antifeminism, and the power of institutions that endorse and enforce antifeminist cancellation demands.

These themed discussions have largely been in relation to bottom-up movements of online users who rally together to enforce moral positions and to maintain conservative views. Li and Ng, in their ongoing examination of canceling practices, reveal important data about the role of top-down state initiated events in supporting these practices. Examining the dynamics between both the bottom-up actions of online users and the top-down State initiated events in case studies in China, they examine practices around financial misconduct (especially tax evasion), hiring sex workers, relationship cheating, and unduly benefiting from privileged positions. They reveal that canceling discursive constructions and contestations in an amalgam of state-led actions to control the content of entertainment media and digital platforms along with grass-roots concerns about celebrity misbehavior and social inequalities have fueled many cases.

Further, as many of our authors make clear, platforms and users are not equally empowered. While, as Bozzi describes, platform interventions to remove extreme or harmful commentary that runs afoul of their content policies serve to reify or create cancel culture as a culture object, the precise role of platforms in perpetuating, propelling, or curtailing cancellation practices is often very opaque. Indeed, Lasade-anderson and Sobande take issue with terms including “cancel culture” in the first instance, arguing that the term can function in ways that mask the extent to which platforms have power over people’s digital visibility. Given the centrality of digital platforms for the phenomenon, they assert that a more comprehensive account of cancel culture is also important with respect to platform politics. Lasade-anderson and Sobande propose that a Black feminist conceptualization of ideology of/as affordance offers a critical intervention to examine the dynamics between ideology, platforms, and relational experiences of autonomy. Such an analytical lens, they assert, puts the concepts of cancel culture and platform affordances in dialog in a productive way because it deals with how both have been wielded and weaponised to infer that individuals have more agency and autonomy online than they typically do.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, cancel culture discussions and associated power flows can vary depending on the political conditions of a cancel event, but also on the cultural and geographical context where a cancel event takes place. The function of platforms in Walia’s cancellation (and Adam, Pauls and Dawson’s imagined cancellations), including their audience infrastructures, governance, and affordances, in intensifying or abating tensions for actors in cancel culture debates is a key part in this process. This introductory article and special issue consider cancel culture to be a complex terrain where power struggles are played out and where every case appears to have far more at stake than the individuals concerned and their actions. Accordingly, the present article and special issue engage with the broader social, cultural and political economic context within which cancel culture operates. Crucially, questions of power and the direction(s) it flows take a central position in our interrogations of cancel culture. Important contextual factors are presented here to better theorize the culture and politics of the phenomenon which our authors contribute. We present these findings in reference to cancel culture’s historical subversion from a space of “useful anger” (Clark 2020) for vulnerabilised communities and in terms of its association with regressive voices and oppressive claims.

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