

Cancel Culture: Social Justice Tool Or Threat To Freedom Of Expression – An Analytical Perspective

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Abstract - New media has reshaped the information landscape by fostering "Prosumers"- users who are consumers and producers of content and information. This transformation stands in contrast to the one-way information control of traditional media. It has now empowered users with unprecedented platforms for communication and activism. Movements like "#MeToo" and "#BlackLivesMatter" gained global traction through new media, amplifying voices and driving social reform at an unprecedented pace.

However, alongside these positive shifts, new media has also given rise to phenomena such as cancel culture. This culture, characterized by withdrawing support or actively opposing individuals based on controversial views, has raised debates on its impact on free speech. For public figures in particular, expressions of controversial opinions can lead to harassment, bullying, and social exclusion, highlighting the divisive nature of cancel culture and the intensity of online backlash.

This study aims to examine the nature of free speech and expression within the context of cancel culture on social media. It also explores user perspectives on whether cancel culture serves as a tool for justice or hinders open discourse. By analyzing these opinions, the study explores how cancel culture reflects broader societal shifts in accountability and digital activism amongst concerns upon limitations on free expression and opinion. The findings emphasize this paradox of cancel culture: it empowers users to hold others accountable yet simultaneously restricts individual expression, creating an environment of restricted speech.

Index Terms - Cancel Culture, New Media, Freedom of Expression, Social Justice, Echo-Chambers, Doomscrolling

Introduction

The advent of New Media has driven transformative changes across all spheres, including economic, social, scientific, and legal domains. It has reshaped global communication by creating platforms that bring individuals closer and connect them within shared, localized communities on a global scale. Social media platforms, in particular, serve as a modern locus for socialization that fosters trends, patterns, and cultures that naturally emerge when people interact in collective environments. The human tendency to form social structures and behavioral norms has been intensified and nurtured by the widespread reach and interactivity of New Media.

Through the proliferation of New Media, various trends, subcultures, and social movements have emerged, each carrying distinct motives, ideologies, and agendas. Originally, social media platforms were designed for efficient, engaging communication; however, as user bases expanded, so too did the platforms' functions and impact. Now it is not just a platform of communication but it has gone beyond the stated interest. Today, New Media transcends mere communication, evolving into a multifaceted ecosystem encompassing marketing, business, entertainment, education, activism, and social reform.

One of the significant features of New Media compared to traditional media lies in its support for user-generated content. This medium actively endorses freedom of speech and expression, allowing individuals to not only consume information but also generate and disseminate it. In this environment, audiences are active participants—a concept termed as "Prosumers," where users are producers as well as consumers of content.

This shift empowers individuals to promote their opinions, perspectives, influence others, and engage in information-sharing networks. This makes New Media an open platform that supports free speech.

With its extensive reach and immediacy, social media has also become a central platform for activism, where users advocate for various social, political, and cultural causes. Thus, social media is frequently utilized as a tool for raising awareness, fostering reform, and creating discourse on pressing issues. The platform's ability to rapidly disseminate and popularize information has allowed certain viewpoints and opinions to gain significant visibility and support, often emerging into widespread trends or movements.

Cancel culture has emerged as a prominent form of social activism and boycotting in recent years. Essentially, it is a variant of boycott culture where individuals, often the public figures or famous, face a withdrawal of social, personal, or even economic support due to their opinions or actions that may be perceived as controversial or offensive. Cancel culture functions as a contemporary method of regulating social norms through public shaming, where moral transgressions are policed by an online collectives (Ng, 2020).

Social media has increasingly become the primary platform for cancel culture, framing individuals for expressing opposing views and often mobilizing vast networks to 'cancel' them. The withdrawal of support can range from loss of social support to significant personal and economic repercussions. Unlike traditional media, which typically kept audiences as passive consumers, New Media has revolutionized this dynamic, as it enables every user to create, share, and engage in content. Thus, the age-old question, "Who Owns the Media?" becomes more complex in the digital age, as users themselves contribute significantly to the production, dissemination, and reshaping of media narratives.

Social media has become a powerful force in contemporary life, paving the way for the rise of digital participatory cultures and social movements (Velasco 2021). The power is in the hands of audience and thus it has become the defendant of free speech and expression. With the rise of movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, users have demonstrated that collective online engagement can amplify voices and drive substantial social reform. This newfound power has established social media as a platform where free speech and expression thrive, allowing users to either support or oppose viewpoints with a sense of social accountability. However, this unregulated power has also led to the rise of harmful trends, including cancel culture, which often operates with no guidelines or checks.

Supporters of cancel culture argue that it functions as a tool of social justice, holding individuals accountable for their actions and addressing inequalities by empowering marginalized voices. Opponents, however, contend that cancel culture poses a threat to freedom of speech and expression, as it nurtures a culture of intolerance and fear to express dissent. This ongoing debate underscores the dual nature of cancel culture and its potential consequences.

This research paper examines the impact of cancel culture on New Media communication, with a focus on social media. Through a survey methodology, it assesses user opinion on cancel culture's influence over communication practices. The study aims to determine whether users perceive cancel culture as a tool for social justice or as a restriction on their right to freely express their views. By analyzing user opinions, this research seeks to contribute valuable insights into the evolving role of social media as both a promoter of free expression and, paradoxically, a platform where expression can be significantly restricted.

Research Methodology:

This study is exploratory and conducted through a qualitative, cross-sectional approach to examine the perspectives of active social media users on cancel culture and its impact on freedom of expression. This approach helps with the collection and statistical analysis of a broad spectrum of user opinions and impact of Cancel Culture across key users demographics.

Sampling:

A stratified random sampling technique is employed, targeting active social media users from distinct demographic segments to ensure representative diversity in responses. The sample includes young media consumers, social media professionals, influencers, and other active users who are regularly engaged with online content and platforms.

The sample size for this study is 200 participants, chosen to gain statistically significant insights into the views and experiences of varied social media audiences.

Survey Tool:

Data is gathered using a structured survey questionnaire designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions for structured data analysis, demographic questions to identify patterns among different user groups, and open-ended questions to capture detailed user opinions on cancel culture.

Data Analysis and Findings

Social Media Usage Patterns

Survey findings indicate distinct patterns in social media usage across respondent demographics, revealing varied motivations and frequency in their online engagement.

Young Users:

A significant portion of young respondents reported high social media usage, with around 70% of their internet time spent on these platforms. The primary purpose for this demographic appears to be entertainment, with activities spanning general browsing, tracking trends and content sharing. A smaller subset (approximately 35%) utilized social media as a platform to showcase artistic and personal talents. Additionally, 20% respondents of the young male respondents reported their social media usage to be focused on gaming and engaging with other gaming communities, illustrating how these platforms foster connections based on shared interests.

Media Professionals:

For media professionals, social media serves primarily as a tool for industry awareness and trend analysis. Their social media engagement centers around monitoring digital trends and understanding audience interactions on various platforms. This demographic leverages social media for professional development, keeping updates of the rapidly evolving online landscapes to adapt their strategies and content accordingly.

Social Media Influencers:

Among influencers, social media usage is particularly high, with a substantial portion of their online time dedicated to brand building and audience engagement. Influencers use social platforms not only for content creation but also to expand their reach, manage brand collaborations, and sustain engagement with followers. Although social media occupies a central role in their online activity, influencers also allocate time to other digital tools and platforms to diversify their content and enhance productivity.

Across all demographics, respondents consistently reported using social media to share opinions, views, and information. Despite varying purposes and usage intensity, social media remains a central avenue for public discourse, connection, and content sharing. Each strata had unique motivations which highlights the dynamic nature of New Media and the diverse roles played by social media from professional utility to personal entertainment and creative expression.

The Compulsion of “Doomscrolling”

The term “**Doomscrolling**” surged in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic as people increasingly engaged in endless, often negative, social media browsing. This compulsive behavior, where users scroll through an overwhelming amount of distressing news and content, underscores a psychological pattern that continues despite being aware of its detrimental effects.

According to BBC (2021) most of us spent some portion of 2020 doomscrolling – so much so that the Oxford English Dictionary named it a word of the year, and even added it to the dictionary. According to Health (2023) “Doomscrolling” also called “Doomsurfing” can be addictive when you’re constantly exposed to negative news and events.

Survey results indicate that a significant number of young respondents and social media influencers are both

aware of doomscrolling and accepted to be actively participating in it. These individuals report that negative content particularly news and controversial topics tends to be more engaging and addictive, fueling their continued consumption despite adverse effects. Media professionals in the study have expressed concerns that doomscrolling is unique among digital behaviors, as its focus on negative content can intensify psychological impact and deepen emotional fatigue for users who frequently engage with such material. Doomscrolling also appears to interact with other social media phenomena, such as cancel culture, by amplifying negativity surrounding specific events or individuals. Consuming repeated streams of negative content may develop curiosity among users to seek additional negative information, intensifying collective outrage and reinforcing cancel culture practices.

Social media influencers in particular have identified doomscrolling as a tool that can increase engagement, as negative or controversial posts tend to generate more curiosity and interaction. By leveraging this phenomenon, content creators often capitalize through such engagement without bearing responsibility for potential impacts. The influencers noted that posts centered on controversy or negative information attract more attention and thereby increase the reach and profitability. This strategy reflects the underlying dynamics of doomscrolling as both a user compulsion and an engagement mechanism.

Falling into Echo Chambers

Online platforms have revolutionized access to information, allowing users to explore countless topics with ease. Despite this boundless information network, many users find themselves constrained within a limited and repetitive stream of content. This effect is largely driven by algorithms, which prioritize content that aligns with a user's previous interactions and preferences. In practice, this means that what users frequently search, like, or engage with is what they are most likely to encounter again, reinforcing familiar ideas and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. We can broadly define echo chambers as environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes. (Cinelli et al., 2021).

The echo chamber effect promotes polarization of information and significantly impacts opinion formation. Users trapped in these patterns of information consumption are often exposed only to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, confirming biases and deepening preconceived notions, regardless of the accuracy of these ideas. This environment can be manipulated by agenda-setters and those with vested interests, who capitalize on the echo chamber phenomenon to influence passive consumers. Consequently, users become more susceptible to opinions that validate their biases, reinforcing positions that may lack factual support but resonate emotionally or ideologically.

The effect of echo chambers is also linked to the growth of cancel culture on social media. Polarized content often divides audiences into supporters and opponents of various issues, and echo chambers reinforce these divisions. A user's position as either an advocate or opposer of an issue is significantly shaped by the content within their online echo chambers, which often provides one-sided perspectives on complex topics.

In this study, media professionals expressed significant concerns over the impact of echo chambers on information quality and audience passivity. They highlighted that echo chambers hinder users from receiving factual, balanced information, constricting the scope of knowledge acquisition and leading audiences away from critical thinking. They fear that this phenomenon makes users into passive recipients where they don't have any opinion of their own and rather depend upon the Media influence opinions.

Among younger respondents, there was limited awareness of the echo chamber effect, yet many acknowledged receiving patterned information that aligns with their past usage. Many reported that their views on social and political issues are shaped, often indirectly, by social media trends and campaigns, indicating the potential influence of echo chambers on their engagement with social causes. Young respondents frequently participate in social movements online, reflecting the influence of social media in their civic and social expression.

Social media influencers, on the other hand, are highly aware of echo chambers and acknowledge the difficulty in breaking free from them. They observe that escaping one echo chamber often leads to entry into another, emphasizing the pervasive nature of algorithmic influence on content consumption patterns. Approximately

65% of respondents noted that their opinions are at least partially influenced by social media, often unconsciously, signifying a passive acceptance of opinions shaped by online algorithms and echo chambers. When sharing views online, users often align with social movements in ways that resonate with their existing beliefs. Young audiences indicated that they “mostly” participate in online discussions around social issues, while media professionals reported “seldom” joining these trends. Influencers, understanding the mechanisms behind trending topics, may participate in popular debates both for engagement purposes and as a reflection of personal views.

Cancel Culture: A Tool of Social Justice?

Social media platforms, designed to foster participatory information exchange, thrive on user engagement through trending topics, opinion polls, content recreation, and more. These mechanisms keep users actively involved, making user-generated content the lifeblood of social media platforms. But as formed by Echo-chambers the information on New Media is highly polarized and so are the audience. Although new media platforms promote free speech, they do not specify “What kind of speech?”, neither does it define “What to Express?”. Consequently, each user becomes responsible for their expressions and their potential societal impacts.

When asked who determines what should be expressed on social media concerning social or political issues, over 83% of respondents indicated that they often align with trending topics. Few users venture beyond viral discussions to voice unique opinions. Many respondents also acknowledged a sense of empowerment through social media, feeling that their voices could contribute to social reform and influence political issues, particularly through large-scale audience support for or opposition to prominent public figures. They feel to be active drivers of bringing about social reforms and the change in the social and political sphere.

The increased prevalence of “media trials” on social media, driven by user-generated discourse, has significantly impacted public opinion and the perception of justice. Media trials involve public opinion forming around legal cases before official judicial conclusions, as audiences often make judgments based on incomplete information received from Social Media. The respondents are also of the opinion that the opinion of the masses is important and thus should be respected for reform or change or for formulating policies. This has encouraged every user to express their sides on Social Media. The result of it is that it has increased the engagement on Social Media but has also expanded the Media trials to Social Media trials. The phenomenon of “Media Trial” has emerged as a potent force, shaping public discourse and influencing perceptions of justice (Dash and Mohapatra 2024).

This phenomenon raises ethical concerns, especially when such opinions infringe on a subject's “Right to a fair trial”. High-profile cases, such as the Sushant Singh Rajput death investigation (2020), exemplify this trend. In this case, social media attention focused intensely on Rajput's girlfriend, Rhea Chakraborty, whom the public prematurely defamed without judicial proof, creating what could be described as a social media-fueled “cancel culture” that severely impacted her personal and professional life. The BBC report (August, 2020) read, “Conservative television hosts have described her as a "manipulative" woman who "performed black magic" and "drove Sushant to suicide". On social media, she has been trolled mercilessly and called a "fortune huntress", a "mafia moll" and "sex bait to trap rich men".”

Civil society activists use informal social pressures designed to sanction and ostracize powerful individuals directly, holding them accountable to society, such as by damaging reputations, derailing careers, denying access to public platforms, and establishing grounds for legal prosecutions (Norris, 2023). However, the efficacy of cancel culture as a tool for social justice is debated. Among respondents, 75% asserted that cancel culture should not be viewed as a means of achieving justice, citing that legal boundaries must be respected to preserve fairness in the judicial process. Only 20% believed cancel culture empowers users to voice concerns freely and that it can effectively hold public figures accountable. The remaining 5% felt that whether cancel culture could serve as a tool for social justice depends on the specific case and circumstances associated. Some users acknowledged that public pressure in high-profile cases might hasten judicial actions, but they also recognized the limitations and potential harm of such influence.

Cancel culture thus cannot be the tool of Social justice as it is not guided practice and does not involve professionals administrations. The Apex Court has stated that concurrent trial by the media has no legal standing in our judicial system as it creates a conflict between the right to “free speech and expression” and the “right to a fair trial”. (Ruchir Mishra, March 2024). Although social media users may participate directly or indirectly in cancel culture, few respondents acknowledged a personal sense of responsibility for the harm caused to cancel culture victims. Instead, they saw themselves as part of a collective expression of opinion, detached from individual accountability.

In conclusion, while cancel culture provides a platform for social advocacy, it often operates without regulatory guidelines or professional administration. It lacks the structure and impartiality necessary to be considered a reliable tool for justice. The unpredictable nature of cancel culture, which often unfairly targets individuals based on popular sentiment rather than evidence, suggests that it is ill-suited to reliably pursue social justice goals.

Free Speech and Expression on Social Media

New Media has been instrumental in redefining communication, offering users access to free speech and expression. Central to this shift is the concept of the “Prosumer,” where each user is not only a consumer but also a producer of content. This shift enables individuals to actively participate in shaping the narratives they consume, rather than passively receiving information.

While empowering users, New Media has also facilitated phenomena like “Cancel Culture.” Originally seen as a way for users to hold individuals accountable, especially public figures, cancel culture now often involves withdrawing social support from individuals who share controversial views. This practice has escalated from criticism to online harassment, bullying, and, in some cases, threats of violence. A well-known example is the backlash against author J.K. Rowling after her 2020 statements on gender identity, which led to extensive online abuse and calls for her work to be boycotted.

Cancel culture’s impact on free speech has become a topic of heated debate. Critics argue it undermines the core values of open debate and freedom of expression. On Cancel culture the conservative and liberal critics argue that the practice has gone too far that it now threatens classical liberal values of free speech and open debate from diverse perspectives (Norris, 2023). Majority of young respondents in this study expressed diverse opinions, while they saw value in calling out powerful individuals for wrongdoing, they also feared facing similar backlash. Many acknowledged a preference for remaining silent on controversial issues to avoid being “canceled.”

Media professionals within this study highlighted that cancel culture obstructs open dialogue on social media, a platform that could otherwise foster global debates and diverse exchanges of thought. Influencers, a subgroup highly affected by cancel culture, noted that they are particularly cautious of expressing views on controversial topics, given that backlash can harm their personal and professional lives. Among them, 13 respondents reported having experienced “cancellation,” which led to psychological distress and affected their online engagements and business opportunities. These influencers, along with other respondents, overwhelmingly felt pressured to compromise their freedom of expression to avoid potential cancellation.

In conclusion, although social media has created avenues for diverse expression, cancel culture creates a significant barrier. Most respondents felt it affects the freedom of speech and expression creating a caution environment rather than open dialogue.

Conclusion:

New Media driven boycott cultures like cancel culture empower users to hold public figures accountable, providing a sense of agency in public discourse. However, this perceived empowerment comes with a cost: a notable limitation on free speech and open expression, as users increasingly self-censor to avoid backlash.

The participants in cancel culture tend to overlook its double-edged nature: while they view it as a tool for social justice, it is unregulated and lacks defined boundaries, meaning any user including its proponents, could become its target. Furthermore, cancel culture leaves very little room for personal growth or error correction,

as it tends to practice a relentless wave of public scrutiny and criticism, even when individuals attempt to make corrections or apologies for their mistakes.

Without oversight or boundaries, cancel culture influences political, social, psychological, and personal spheres in ways that are sometimes disproportionate or harmful.

The findings of this study highlight a shared sentiment among users: cancel culture is effective as long as they are not on the receiving end. Individuals who contribute to or support cancel culture rarely acknowledge the personal and professional damage it can cause its victims. This trend-driven, echo-chamber phenomenon sidelines nuanced perspectives, creating a space where popular sentiment overrides individual opinion.

Ultimately, cancel culture complicates social media's potential as an open platform for dialogue over any controversy or issue. The fear of cancellation discourages users from openly sharing views, limiting free expressions.

Therefore, despite its outer appeal as a means of justice, cancel culture's restrictive nature and tendency to suppress diverse voices suggest it is not a sustainable tool for achieving true social justice. Instead, it compromises the principles of open discourse and freedom of expression that are foundational to New Media platforms.

The dual nature of cancel culture; empowering yet restrictive; reveals a great challenge for online discourse, suggesting that while cancel culture may hold users accountable, it also undermines the foundational ideals of free speech and open debate, narrowing it to pseudo concept.

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