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DIVERSITY

Canceling ‘Cancel Culture’—How a Movement for Acceptance Lost Its Way

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On Dec. 20, 2013, Justine Sacco boarded a series of flights that would take her from her home in New York City to South Africa, where she planned to spend her holiday. During the trip, she haphazardly typed out a series of tweets to her mere 170 followers. She tweeted about the body odor of a German man sitting near her. She tweeted about the bad teeth found in the mouths of fellow travelers in London.

And just before she took off for her flight to Cape Town, she typed out one final tweet—“Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding, I’m white.”

When Sacco’s flight landed eleven hours later, she and her tweet—which she claimed was designed to draw attention to her privilege in a humorous manner—was the most



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trending message on the entire platform. In fact, while her plane was in the air, more than 100,000 people around the world had commented on it or shared it. Nearly all of those comments were angry and highly critical of Sacco.

While the world’s reaction was not at all surprising—this tweet is equally offensive and humorless—the glee with which Twitter users vilified Sacco was startling. Indeed, during the time Sacco was in the air, the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet was trending all across the world. Not only were these users criticizing the tweet, they were waiting with

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perverse anticipation for the moment Justine Sacco would turn on her phone and realize she was being publicly shamed by 100,000 people she did not know.

Upon arrival in Cape Town, she immediately realized that she had become a worldwide villain. She was fired from her job, and her name became synonymous with white privilege and carelessness. Sacco was, in that moment, canceled by the entire world because of a single tweet to her 170 Twitter followers.

At its core, canceling is a process by which an individual is publicly shamed and effectively expelled from social or professional circles because that individual acted or spoke in a manner that is questionable or controversial in the eyes of the canceling group. The process of cancellation, or calling out, typically begins on an online platform with a single objection and a call to action for others to pile on and shame the offender for their conduct. This call to action then often expands to demands that the offender be terminated from their job and be removed from any positions of power or influence.

Cancel culture is, however, not interested in rehabilitation or apology. Indeed, the mere act of retracting or deleting a tweet or issuing a seemingly heartfelt apology is almost never enough to stop the rising tide of condemnation. Cancel culture is instead grounded in punishment and public shaming that turns an individual into a villain (or, as in the case of Sacco, a cautionary tale). This is not to say many offenders do not deserve these outcomes. It is just that the outcome is nearly always the same.

But the question remains—if cancel culture is designed to combat

and avoid abusive behavior and to renegotiate the boundaries of acceptable speech and behavior in our society, is it working?

There are some obvious benefits to cancel culture. Calling out allows marginalized communities to modulate the specific language that can be used to describe them in a direct way. Let's say that members of the Asian community oppose the way that an elected official is referring to them; that community can quickly and easily mobilize online and demonstrate en masse their opposition to that language. Prior to the popularity of online platforms, this type of modulation would have been nearly impossible.

It is also highly effective in addressing the behavior of famous or otherwise powerful people who are perceived as inaccessible or untouchable. Take, for example, Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby, both of which were called out—and eventually canceled—by large online groups who had been unable to hold those men accountable in the past through legal means.

On a more granular level, the sheer possibility of cancellation has likely caused bigoted, racist and homophobic individuals to refrain from voicing those opinions pub-

licly. If one of the goals of cancel culture is to reset the acceptable bounds of public discourse through public shaming and fear, then it has worked. Put simply, the fear of cancellation has caused many to consider whether voicing an anti-inclusive opinion is worth the potential consequence.

However, these positives pale in comparison to the negative effects of cancel culture, one of which is that it dehumanizes both the victim and those canceling that individual. Returning to the story of Sacco, more than 100,000 people were involved in her public shaming. To them, Sacco was not a real person. She was embodied completely by the racist and tasteless tweet she sent out into the world. The effects on Sacco's life, however, were real, pronounced, and long-lasting.

The sheer volume of vulgar, misogynistic, and even violent messages hurled at Sacco undoubtedly occurred (at least in part) because online platforms allow users to engage in public humiliation campaigns from the anonymous comfort of their homes. While almost none of those people would have the courage—or even the desire—to say these things to Sacco's face, Twitter provides a forum for a single critical

response to be swallowed up into a sea of similar messages without any personal responsibility for the effect of that message on the human target.

Cancel culture also exists, in many ways, in the realm of perception rather than in the world of facts. Take the case of David Peterson, an art professor at Skidmore College, who faced a cancel campaign after students spotted him at a “Back the Blue” rally in July 2020. While Peterson stated that “civic interest and curiosity” about what was being said at this pro-police rally led him to attend, the students demanded his termination immediately, before ever speaking with Peterson or allowing him to explain the reasons he attended.

In a calling-out situation such as this one, guilt is often immediately presumed, and no explanation is sufficient to overcome that presumption. Even though Peterson claimed he did nothing more than listen at the rally, he found himself the target of a student boycott and a bias investigation by the college before he had a formal opportunity to address either. There is rarely due process or factual verification in the world of cancel culture. The accusation and punishment come first, with

the verification of the perceived wrong coming later, if at all.

In addition, there is no equal justice doled out by cancel culture. Out of the nearly 500 million Tweets sent out every day, a small but significant portion of them are offensive, racist, sexist, and homophobic. But on that day in 2013, it was only Sacco’s tweet that became the arbitrary target of so many users around the world.

The most pronounced effect of cancel culture, however, is that it often stifles the very critical conversations necessary for us to evolve as a society. There was no conversation between Twitter users and Sacco or between Skidmore students and Peterson. The accusation and the public shaming were the beginning and end of the conversation. Calling out does not lead to critical discourse regarding racism or bigotry and the language used to support those things. It instead stifles speech and makes bystanders who witness cancellation afraid of speaking up or engaging in conversations out of fear the same will happen to them.

So what can be done to advance inclusion and equity in a responsible and thoughtful way? Loretta J. Ross, a Smith College professor, has a solution that might do that

very thing. She calls it “calling in,” a noncombative technique that promotes private engagement and conversation with an individual who has engaged in anti-inclusive behavior. In Ross’ words, “it’s a call out done with love.”

Calling in has gained significant traction, especially within professional environments, due to its focus on patience and tolerance. While calling out is often anonymous and online, calling in is personal and intimate and requires two people to have uncomfortable conversations about the effect of a person’s words and actions. The foundation of these conversations, however, is forgiveness and a belief that people can grow and change through further understanding. This same belief is conspicuously absent from the process of cancellation, which suggests its long-term effect will be limited. ●