



CANCEL
CULTURE

2021 CONFERENCE REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Executive Summary
- 3 Keynote Speaker
- 4 Panels
- 5 Contributor Biographies
- 6 Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

While character assassination has taken a variety of forms throughout history, a current and particularly controversial practice of social ostracism has bred “cancel culture.”

Cancel culture refers to when a person, typically a public figure, is expelled from their social or professional circles as a result of offensive behavior, real or alleged. The expression is generally used by those who feel they are being unfairly punished for minor transgressions.

As a form of public shaming, those who are “canceled” may be scapegoated or stigmatized and exposed to the judgment and bullying of the public. Canceled individuals may, in perception or reality, find themselves silenced and unable to speak on their own behalf.

While cancel culture is often linked to the rise of social media, practices of silencing and social exclusion have many historical antecedents, ranging from public scapegoating rituals to rebellious mobs tearing down the statues of disgraced individuals.

CARP's 3rd International Conference on “Cancel Culture and Character Assassination” took place September 21-23, 2021. It attracted scholars from 13 countries focusing on the contemporary issues associated with cancel culture from a variety of disciplinary and cultural angles.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Character assassination (CA) theory is grounded in scholarly research that encompasses a diverse range of academic fields, including psychology, history, and rhetorical studies.** The theory is constantly evolving, with new conceptual ideas provided by scholars of sociology, political science, communication, and conflict resolution. CA theory provides a conceptual framework to study cancel culture as a social phenomenon and a communication process.
- **In the United States, the opinions on cancel culture are divided across partisan lines.** Left-leaning Americans tend to view cancel culture as accountability, while those on the right are more likely to view cancel culture as punishment, censorship of speech and history, or an attack on traditional American values. These two camps are divided in five key areas: 1) whether cancelers are rushing to judge or trying to be helpful, 2) whether social media call-outs are productive, 3) the importance of free speech vs. creating a comfortable online environment, 4) the motivations that drive cancel culture, and 5) whether people should speak up when they encounter offensive content online.
- **Historians trace the roots of cancel culture to ancient and medieval practices like ostracism, memory erasing, and witch hunts.** Cancel culture is associated with contemporary public debates about controversial historical monuments. Researchers have found that political partisanship mediates attitudes towards canceling historical figures and removing their statues. These attitudes can be influenced by framing media effects. Facts, anecdotes, and personal information about historical figures affects public opinion regarding the future of controversial monuments.
- **Scholars can encourage a broader societal discourse around historical figures that are not in line with contemporary moral values.** They can create alternative ways to examine historical issues using burgeoning research on trauma and public memory. Researchers can open a new line of study into the actual operations of cancel culture and its social dynamics. Cross-cultural research can identify in which societies cancel culture is likely to thrive.

- **Research on cancel culture has implications for institutional policy.** Canceling is used to silence dissenters, gain institutional control, and maintain existing institutional hierarchies. The need to shame and stigmatize individual targets spurs the search for scapegoats. However, canceling as a punitive measure fails to enforce accountability because it denies targets opportunities for corrective actions and forgiveness. Moreover, it prevents necessary reflection and the chance to learn from mistakes. Thus, cancel culture is contrary to democratic values rooted in open-mindedness and freedom of thought.
- **Cancellation rhetoric has become a popular rhetorical tool in political communication.** This rhetoric is increasingly used by governments as part of information warfare between foreign nations. Politicians and diplomats discredit other nations in the same way they defame domestic political rivals. International attempts to cancel rogue countries risk conditioning them to act in ways that threaten world peace. In some societies, politicians frame cancel culture as a new threat to traditionalist values to unite their constituents around a national ideology.
- **Social media amplifies cancel culture's effects, encouraging simplistic content, provocative behavior, and moral outrage.** Active publics often perceive canceling as entertainment, performance, and competition. They use public call-outs as opportunities to demonstrate their rhetorical skills. This contest of mockery and shaming often prevents the creation of real solutions to critical systemic issues. Late-night comedy shows contribute to political bias by selectively ridiculing some politicians while ignoring the shortcomings of others.
- **Artificial intelligence (AI) expands the scope and outreach of disinformation campaigns using deepfakes.** Malicious actors use synthetic media to deceive publics and destroy reputations. Due to the novelty of deepfakes, the general public remains largely unaware of the reputation threats they pose. A lack of reliable detection software impedes prevention management.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

EMILY A. VOGELS, PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In her keynote speech, Emily A. Vogels presented the key findings of the Pew Research Center's 2021 report "Americans and 'Cancel Culture': Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment."

For around 30 years, the slang term "cancel" was used in television, movies, and songs to refer to break-ups. On social media, the expression was redefined as an expression of disapproval. Soon, Internet users began referring to an emerging "cancel culture," where users called out, shamed, and even mobbed those whose views and behavior were considered offensive.

To better understand the breadth and depth of American public opinion regarding cancel culture, Pew Research Center surveyed 10,093 Americans about what they think it means, whether they see calling out others online primarily as a form of accountability or punishment, and why they hold that stance. Their findings offer insight about the general public's familiarity with cancel culture, as well as their attitudes towards the phenomenon and the behaviors associated with it.

Survey data revealed that 58% of respondents believed that calling out content on social media usually holds people accountable for offensive words or actions, while 38% said that call outs usually punish people who don't deserve it.

Using survey participants' open-ended responses, Vogels identified five key areas of disagreement between the "accountability" and "punishment" camps: 1) whether cancellers are rushing to judge or trying to be helpful, 2) whether calling out others on social media is productive behavior, 3) whether free speech or creating a comfortable online environment is more important, 4) what drives cancellers to call out others online, and 5) whether people should speak up when they encounter offensive content online.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

EMILY A. VOGELS, PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Among those who view cancel culture as accountability, respondents described call-outs as teaching/learning moments that encourage people to think before they speak and consider the consequences of their words. They also believe the cancellation process helps expose social ills like racism and sexism.

Conversely, those who view cancel culture as punishment say that people are often overreacting and failing to consider the context in which statements are made. They think that "offensive" is a subjective term that should not be used as an excuse to police others' free speech.

The data also reveals that Americans' opinions on cancel culture are divided across partisan lines. 75% of Democrat respondents believe that online call-outs hold people accountable for their actions, while 56% of Republican respondents view call-outs as a form of punishment. Republicans were also more likely to describe cancel culture as censorship of speech, censorship of history, or an attack on traditional American society.

Vogels highlighted important considerations that may have impacted Pew's data. Since the survey was fielded during the run-up to the 2020 American presidential election, the prevailing political climate may have influenced participants' responses. The survey's lack of sentiment analysis and potential non-response bias in the open-ended question portion also may have affected the results.

This survey focused on a single dimension of cancel culture, public online call-outs. Future research should explore public attitudes towards other behaviors associated with cancel culture, as well as related phenomena like "call-out culture." However, it is clear that American public opinion on cancel culture is deeply divided, and political partisans hold diametrically opposed perspectives on the practice of "calling out" others for their views.

PANEL 1

NEW INSIGHTS INTO CHARACTER ASSASSINATION THEORY

Character assassination scholarship is a developing area of study that incorporates insights from a variety of academic fields, including rhetoric, psychology, history, and communication. Cancel culture is a new venue for CA scholars. Social psychology contributes to our understanding of the process of cancellation, as well as its impacts on society. Rhetoricians see cancel culture as a rhetorical maneuver that is particularly useful when crafting a persona, constituting an audience, and constructing the best rhetorical situation. History reveals whether incidents akin to contemporary cancel culture can be found in previous historical periods. Finally, from a communication theory perspective, cancel culture can be viewed as a deep-seated social and moral conflict that aims to replace traditional conventions and norms with new interpretations.

Jennifer Keohane (University of Baltimore) argued that cancel culture is a particularly useful rhetorical strategy when crafting a persona, constituting an audience, and constructing kairos.

To illustrate how people across the political spectrum use cancel culture in their discourse, she examined two case studies of public figures who claim to be targets of cancel culture: Missouri senator Josh Hawley and British author J.K. Rowling. In the American context, the use of this rhetorical move is correlated with partisan affiliation. However, although Republicans are more likely than Democrats to adopt a cancel culture victim identity, individuals across the political spectrum use claims of cancellation as a strategic message to influence and persuade their audiences. Professed victims incorporate these claims into their rhetoric by crafting a persona through which blame is displaced, which effectively positions the purported “victim” to deliver a persuasive call to action. They then adapt rhetorical elements which resonate with their audience, including language, appeals, and arguments. Thus, Keohane concludes that claims about cancel culture are powerful rhetorical maneuvers that call people to action.

2

Eric Shiraev (George Mason University) addressed the psychological impact of silencing, one of the results of cancellation.

Shiraev explored the "forbidden fruit" phenomenon, in which targets continue to attract attention even after they have been socially marginalized and "canceled." This phenomenon occurs due to increased cognitive interest and emotional attraction to individuals and ideas deemed unacceptable, undesirable, or inappropriate. Shiraev discussed several clusters of theories that speculate why this phenomenon occurs, including psychological reactance, cognitive dissonance, and cognitive deprivation and marginalization phenomena. Using a scandalology formula, Shiraev hypothesized that the inconsistent impacts of cancellation in contemporary American culture results from two broader factors: the quality and quantity of attacks and the societal sensitivity to certain issues such as racial discrimination and gender inequality. Finally, the most impactful character attacks come from a variety of credible, non-partisan sources. Taken together, these factors explain why some cancellations stick and others get swept under the rug.

3

Martijn Icks (University of Amsterdam) discussed character assassination and cancel culture in historical perspective.

First, Icks identified common methods of character assassination, including name-calling, making allegations, ridiculing, fearmongering, exposing, disgracing, and erasing. Drawing parallels between historical character assassination and contemporary cancel culture, the author discussed whether incidents akin to contemporary cancel culture can be found in previous historical periods. Icks discussed several examples of historical character assassination, eventually finding that none fit all three key elements of modern-day cancel culture: accountability, moral outrage, and public pressure. For example, although the practice of ostraca in classical Athens involved public pressure, it was not intended to hold the powerful accountable and did not always involve moral outrage. While the Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae* held disgraced emperors accountable for their misdeeds by destroying their reputation and legacy, often reflecting moral outrage towards the dishonor their actions had brought upon the Empire, *damnatio memoriae* was elite-driven and did not result from public pressure. Finally, Icks considers whether witch hunts are a potential example of historical cancellation. Although cancel culture is often described as a modern-day witch hunt, Icks identifies an important difference: while witch hunting involved public pressure from outraged mobs, it did not hold targets accountable for their actions. Additionally, the targets of witch hunts were typically already poor, ostracized, or otherwise marginal. Icks concluded that the development of a public sphere is required to sustain cancel culture; for this reason, the French Revolution may be the first true example of historical cancel culture.

4 Sergei A. Samoilenko (George Mason University) discussed the need to distinguish between cancel culture as a process and cancel culture as a moral conflict.

During moral conflicts, each ideological camp attempts to reaffirm its legitimacy and simultaneously questions the reputation of its opponents. Incompatible beliefs and values often center around central issues in public policy. Cancel culture can be understood as a deep-seated social conflict that aims to replace traditional conventions and norms with new interpretations. Character assassination (CA) accompanies political and social conflicts, especially when unresolved ideological and moral issues are involved. Social conflicts become aggravated when moral issues intermix with political and economic factors. Factions then resort to extreme means of social persuasion – namely, character assassination – to delegitimize and disempower their opponents. Samoilenko concludes that future research should examine whether CA campaigns accelerate the adoption of new moral norms promulgated by cancel culture campaigns.

PANEL 2 THE IMPACT OF CANCEL CULTURE ON PUBLIC OPINION

Cancel culture is driven by social media. The quest to create shareable online content fosters simplistic discourse that drives increasingly provocative behavior, encouraging extreme ideologies and moral rages. Communication on platforms like Twitter tends towards symbolism and abstraction, which fosters a simplistic discourse in which buzzwords obstruct the complex nuances of real-world issues. Some cancellation campaigns focusing on individual outbursts of racism may hinder useful responses and prevent the creation of real solutions. In addition, canceling may be an ineffective method to create lasting cultural change and foster transformative justice in capitalist societies dominated by neo-liberal values. Although cancel culture is an international phenomenon, its impact on public opinion is varied and context-dependent. Case studies from the Brazilian Internet illustrate how societies with highly developed digital cultures use cancel culture as a form of entertainment by zeroing in on celebrities and placing them into online “cancel court.” In the Russian context, cancel culture has gained prominence as a form of power struggle in which traditional values compete with so-called new ethics, which can be seen as a moral conflict between conservative and progressive values. However, the impact of cancel culture on society is often moderated by state interference and influence.

1 Gwen Bouvier (The Institute of Corpus Studies and Applications, Shanghai International Studies University, China) discussed the factors that prevent social justice campaigns on Twitter, commonly known as cancellations, from achieving their goals.

Bouvier argued that social media fosters a simplistic discourse in which buzzwords obstruct the complex nuances of real-world issues. Twitter users also hijack trending cancellations to garner more attention to their agendas. This quest to create likable and shareable content drives ever more excessive and provocative behavior, encouraging extreme ideologies and moral rages. Bouvier warns that cancel culture campaigns run the risk of concealing the true nature of the issues they seek to challenge and combat. Through excessive focus on individual outbursts of racism, cancellers decontextualize racism and separate individual bad actors from the structures that sustain racial hierarchies. By collapsing all forms of racism from different eras into one all-encompassing phenomenon, Bouvier argued that cancel campaigns hinder useful responses and prevent the creation of real solutions.

2

Ricardo Matos de Araújo Rios and Marina dos Santos Franco (Centro Universitário Presidente Antônio Carlos, Brazil) explored the impact of excessive media exposure on Brazilian celebrities within the context of social networks.

Rios and Franco argued that the Internet enhances cancel culture because it encourages and enables individuals to voice their unfiltered opinions. Social networks allow users to access their target's page and express their discontent through likes, dislikes, comments, hashtags, and even private messages, increasing celebrities' chances of cancellation. To understand how intense scrutiny of Brazilian celebrities on social media leads to cancellation in the public sphere and their private lives, Rios and Franco examined the case of Karol Conká, who was canceled after her appearance on the Brazilian reality show Big Brother Brazil. Conká became the most rejected participant in the history of Big Brother Brazil when she was voted off by 99.17% of the audience. This overwhelming "verdict" reflects the emotional intensity of the online Brazilian "cancel court," where viewers posted their judgements and condemnations of Conká's bullying behavior throughout her stint on the show. Rios and Franco also note that public opinion turned decidedly against Ms. Conka after she insulted a cast member from the northeast region of Brazil, as well as when she bullied and fought with another cast member of African heritage. These incidents highlight the sociocultural aspect of cancel culture. Though the public does not always view bullying as immoral, Conká's behavior so offended Brazilian Internet users that even those who were not fans of Big Brother Brazil declared her behavior "unwatchable" and united to remove her from the show.

3

Perry B. Johnson, Ph.D. (University of Pennsylvania) and Caitlin J. Dobson (University of Southern California) considered the complexities of cancel culture and the possibility of fostering transformative justice in a capitalist society dominated by neo-liberal values.

To examine how systems of oppression are upheld by reactionary activism calling for the "cancellation" of key actors, the authors interrogated three highly-mediated case studies using a critical discourse analysis of social and online media. Johnson and Dobson argued that current approaches rooted in punitive justice fail to provide long-term solutions or dismantle the structures of power that perpetuate harm. Instead, they cede power back to the systems they seek to hold accountable. They also explored how the groundswell of backlash in response to the cases they studied brought temporal visibility to abuses of power, while also serving as a guise for justice. Johnson and Dobson highlighted the objectives, pitfalls, and ambivalence of "cancel/callout culture," arguing that the well-intentioned motivations that spur such mobilizations are rooted in anti-abolitionist ideologies and are ultimately ineffective in creating lasting cultural change. Their research advances a critical understanding of cancel culture by considering the phenomenon within the broader history of online activism and examining its efficacy as a form of direct action.

4

Ilya Bykov (Saint Petersburg State University, Russia) examined the role of cancel culture in contemporary Russian political discourse.

According to the scholar, cancel culture is a part of media culture in Russia. He argued that its influence on the political agenda and the political process is significantly limited by several paradoxes. In some echo chambers, the slightest disagreement with popular opinion may lead to cancellation. Although the term “canceled” carries weight among celebrities and influencers, it maintains a relatively limited impact among the general population. Additionally, since many celebrities use artificial marketing promotions to tamper with their likes, followers, and subscriber counts, targets of cancellation who lose a portion of their audience can simply buy back their lost engagement. Lastly, Bykov noted that culturally specific standards of political correctness determine what gets canceled in Russia, so there is a lack of firm, objective standards surrounding who and what becomes a target of cancellation.

PANEL 3

CANCEL CULTURE, ONLINE PLATFORMS, AND STRATEGIC DECEPTION

Social media and artificial intelligence technology have diversified the tactics employed by today's character assassins. Character assassination has become a common rhetorical device in the arsenal of right wing politicians internationally, who co-opt the rhetoric of cancel culture to destroy their targets and pursue strategic objectives in domestic and international political contexts. These reputational threats against public figures are intensified by the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web, a move which mobilizes social actors to engage in cancellation campaigns, which are often viewed as performance acts. In addition, despite growing reputational threats from deepfake technology for politicians and other public figures, public awareness of the threat remains low and is compounded by a lack of reliable detection.

Inna Suvorova (University College London, U.K.) and Sergei A. Samoilenko (George Mason University) examined the use of deepfakes as a form of strategic deception.

Strategic deception is the application of deceptive stratagems by pragmatic actors, seeking to attain their goals within a particular media system. Disinformation campaigns are often used to discredit or spread rumors about one's political opponents. The scholars discussed three case studies involving the use of deepfakes: altered videos of Nancy Pelosi spread on Twitter by former U.S. president Donald Trump, pro-Kremlin pranksters' use of lip synchronization to impersonate Russian opposition figure Leonid Volkov, and the use of generative adversarial networks (GAN) that use synthetic data to create deceptive images. Finally, Suvorova and Samoilenko examined several obstacles to deepfake detection. Though there are two open-source deepfake detection tools in common use today, they are unreliable and difficult to use. They concluded that although politicians and other public figures face growing reputational threats from deepfake technology, awareness of the threat remains low and is compounded by a lack of reliable detection methods.

2 **Rafaela Tabasnik (Unisinos University, Brazil) examined the cancellation of Brazilian rapper Karol Conká through actor-network theory.**

In 2021, Brazilian singer and rapper Karol Conká was a contestant on the reality show Big Brother Brasil 21. Her unsympathetic behavior towards her housemates garnered negative reactions from fellow participants and viewers alike. A Twitter account, @rejeaodakarol, began calling for Conká's cancellation and encouraging viewers to vote her off the show. This account quickly gathered more followers than Conká's official social media pages. This online campaign culminated in a record-breaking 99.17% of the audience voting to evict Conká from the Big Brother house. According to Latour, one of the primary developers of actor-network theory, everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships. Tabasnik argued that Conká's cancellation illustrates how social actors in cancel culture are mobilized to engage in cancellation. The "platformization" of the digital world helps create online controversies and intensify patterns of cancel culture. These controversies, which can be viewed as performances or narratives, build stories about who is being canceled and who is canceling. These "narratives of life" are structured by the construction of the self, expressive coherence, and everyday performances. Conká's nomination, the public's negative reactions, brands' decisions to end professional relationships with her, and Conká's efforts to manage her reputation after the show all represent daily performances and changing relationships between actors and their networks.

3 **Carlo Berti and Enzo Loner (University of Trento, Italy) discussed the character assassination as a right-wing populist communication tactic on social media through the case study of Italian League politician Matteo Salvini.**

The scholars found that Salvini's attacks focused on personal traits and behaviors and were used to delegitimize his perceived enemies rather than discuss political issues. He repeatedly targeted individuals, who were used to represent broad groups of people such as entire political parties. Berti and Loner identified five primary functions that character assassination serves in right-wing populist discourse. The polarizing function reinforces anti-elitism and can be simplified as "people vs. elites." The personalizing function is a form of simplified communication that constructs villains to sustain the narrative of "good versus evil," thereby reinforcing the figure of the charismatic leader. The discriminatory function reinforces nationalistic and exclusionary politics by attributing negative traits to individuals belonging to particular groups, especially on the basis of nationality, religion, and political orientation. The emotional function reinforces right-wing populism's aggressive tone and focus on negative emotions by offering easily identifiable targets (i.e. individuals) for these emotions. Finally, the symbolic function attributes negative traits to individuals and the broader groups to which they belong, which reinforces a Manichean worldview of heterogeneous groups.

PANEL 4 CANCEL CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

Cancel culture has become part of organizational debates and controversies. Canceling is often used as a mechanism to maintain existing institutional hierarchies and silence dissenters. For instance, academic mobbing is used as a tool of coercive institutional control. Oftentimes, the names used to refer to cancel culture constitute frames which reflect individual biases and affect attitudes towards instances of cancel culture. There is a tendency to apply the term “cancellation” to campaigns against targets they support and “accountability” to targets with whom they disagree. Cancel culture merely isolates and shames its targets into submission, which makes it difficult to learn and grow from mistakes. Additionally, cancel culture denies the canceled individual the opportunity to apologize and be forgiven. Scholars and institutions are encouraged to work towards ethical inquiry and debate in the academy without character assassination; this is a call for open-mindedness, academic freedom, and creative inquiry. In addition, future research must address the steps that transgressors can take to circumvent cancel culture and repair their images.

Rod Carveth (Morgan State University) used the cancellation of talk show hostess Sharon Osbourne as a case study to explore whether cancel culture is an effective form of accountability.

In March 2021, Oprah Winfrey conducted an interview with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Duke and Duchess of Sussex, who claimed that members of the British royal family had voiced racist concerns about their unborn baby’s skin color and dismissed Markle’s struggles with mental health. When controversial British broadcaster Piers Morgan questioned the veracity of the Duke and Duchess’ story, Good Morning Britain demanded that he apologize for his remarks. Shortly after resigning from his role on the show, Morgan’s longtime friend and fellow talk show presenter Sharon Osbourne tweeted a message of support, which led to serious backlash online. The controversy was also addressed on The Talk, where Osbourne engaged in a heated discussion with one of her co-hostesses, Sheryl Underwood. After Underwood argued that Osbourne’s support of Morgan had enabled racism, Osbourne left the show, eventually reaching a settlement on her contract with CBS. Carveth argued that cancel culture merely isolates and shames its targets into submission, which makes it difficult to learn and grow from mistakes. Additionally, cancel culture denies the canceled individual the opportunity to apologize and be forgiven. Future research must address the steps that transgressors can take to circumvent cancel culture and repair their images.

2 Michael Dudley (University of Winnipeg, Canada) analyzed orthodox rhetoric and scholarly practices regarding the Shakespeare Authorship Question (SAQ) as a form of cancel culture at the elite level, practiced by institutions, universities, and members of the mass media who call upon scholars for expertise.

To illustrate how the SAQ is excluded from the mainstream, Dudley applied a framework for instructing information literacy in higher education to key examples of Stratfordian rhetoric and scholarly publishing practices. He honed in on how two rhetorical modes of persuasion, ethos and pathos, are used to suppress the SAQ, demonstrating the extent to which these marginalizing rhetorics and practices constitute a pattern of epistemic vice. Dudley's work examines orthodox convictions regarding the Shakespeare of tradition as part of a juridical belief system which represents an under-examined yet significant threat to academic freedom camouflaged as an assertion of historical fact. Dudley concluded with some thoughts on how scholars and institutions can work towards ethical inquiry and debate in the academy without character assassination, as well as a call for open-mindedness, academic freedom, and creative inquiry in the study of the authorship of Shakespeare's works.

3 Amy Schumacher-Rutherford (University of Kansas) argued that the names used to refer to cancel culture constitute frames, which both reflect individual biases and affect attitudes towards instances of cancel culture.

Schumacher-Rutherford discussed three studies that highlight the utility and influence of framing, supporting its suitability for the study of cancel culture. According to Entman (1993), frames identify problems, establish causes, offer moral judgements, and contain recommended solutions, while Nelson and Oxley (1999) concluded that framing contributes to individuals' opinions by affecting the content and importance of their beliefs. Jacoby (2000) also found that the use of general versus specific frames can lead to opinion changes at the individual level. Schumacher-Rutherford then discussed her efforts to investigate whether attitudes towards cancel culture were influenced by framing effects. Using a web-based survey experiment, the scholar planned to examine the impact of partisan affiliation, specific versus general framing, and cancel culture versus consequence culture framing on attitudes towards incidents of cancellation and cancel culture as a phenomenon.

4 Leslie J. Reynard (Center for Applied Communication Research, Inc., U.S.) explored how academic mobbing, a form of character assassination, is used as a tool of coercive institutional control.

Mobbing is a type of bullying that occurs in workplaces, often with the de facto support of managers and administrators. In higher education, by procedurally constituting and deputizing mobs, institutions simultaneously can rid themselves of recalcitrant professors, accomplish strategic economic goals, and expand their managerial power. Reynard applied current research into the phenomenon of "downward administrative mobbing" to the situations faced by two tenured professors: Dr. Michael Shively of Utah Valley University and Dr. Mike Adams of the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Campus-based "cancellation campaigns" that attacked their scholarly reputations and collegial relationships and ultimately drove them to suicide. Both professors were targeted and mobbed by faculty colleagues given free rein by the administrative hierarchy of their universities. These case studies illustrate the mechanics of the five stages of academic mobbing first described by sociologist Kenneth Westhues in 1998: ostracization, harassment, "the incident," the aftermath of investigation, and the elimination. Mobbing has become a global phenomenon incorporating the same general phases Westhues set out. Reynard notes that these institutional cancel-culture operations not only are threats to the careers, reputations and lives of those targeted but they also can be similarly deadly to any cultural cohesion that may exist within those institutions.

PANEL 5

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AND CANCEL CULTURE THEORY

Interdisciplinary scholars are developing emerging ideas that move the study of character assassination towards theory-building. A novel idea is country character assassination, when international politicians and diplomats attempt to defame rival countries in on the world stage in the same way that they defame their political enemies in the domestic political environment. Several concepts drawn from sociology, including Goffman's social dramaturgy and strategic interaction, hold promise for the measurement, analysis, and comparison of CA incidents. Conflict theory provides an understanding of cancel culture in the Russian context, where state propaganda cultivates perceptions of "natural" moral conflict between Russian and "Western" values. The analysis of the analogy contained within the term "character assassination" enables a deeper understanding of the phenomena, especially when examined alongside the theoretical construct of inoculation theory.

Mykola Bondarenko (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine) argued for the use of a sociological approach to measure, analyze, and compare the manifestations of character assassination.

Since an array of quantitative and qualitative methods (including surveys/polls, focus groups, in-depth and expert interviews, content and visual analysis) can be used to study character assassination, flexible sociological methodologies allow scholars to mix various theoretical approaches to study the concept from different angles. According to Andrew Phelps, character assassination requires three parties: the character assassin or agent, the public whose estimation is to be altered or audience, and the person targeted or victim. Bondarenko argues that Phelps' definition shares a structural basis with a simplified sociological communication model proposed by Harold Lasswell (that, besides the communicated message, consists of the transmitter, the medium, the receiver/audience, and the effect), supporting the suitability of a sociological approach. Finally, Bondarenko discussed several sociology-specific concepts that hold promise for the analysis of character assassination, including Goffman's social dramaturgy and strategic interaction.

2 Neofytos Aspriadis (University of Peloponnese, Greece) argued that political leaders use character assassination techniques to defame countries in international political discourse in the same way that they defame their political enemies in the domestic political environment.

Aspriadis described interstate character assassination as the process and outcome of a systematic attempt of a nation's political elite to defame an opponent on the world stage. Interstate character assassination is often used during conflict as a strategic communication tool that countries use to pursue their strategic and diplomatic goals. Assassins may target political leaders identified with a rival country, the country itself as an entity, or the country's people. To move towards a more complete understanding of interstate character assassination, Aspriadis created a typology of rhetorical strategies commonly used in international political communication, including strategic deception/disinformation, strategic blaming, and dehumanization/demonization. To explore how these strategies were used during real-life international crises, Neofytos employed qualitative content and rhetorical discourse analyses of the speeches of President George W. Bush during the invasion of Iraq and President Barack Obama during the 2014 Ukraine crisis.

3 Alina Eremina (Higher School of Economics, Russia), Anton Gumenskiy (Moscow State University, Russia), and Sergei Samoilenko (George Mason University) discussed cancel culture as a sociocultural issue, examining how the clash between progressive Western values and "traditional Russian values" affects the public perception of cancel culture in Russia.

Using case studies of successful and failed cancel culture campaigns, the authors offer two lenses to understand Russian cancel culture. The first hypothesis argued that cancel culture in Russia is primarily a political matter, and that proximity to authority and power takes the place of an independent institute of reputation in Russian society. In this hypothesis, cancel culture either results from direct orders, instructions, recommendations, and support from the Kremlin, or from indirect, "behind the curtain" influence and manipulations in favor of certain ideologies, decisions, and practices. In the second hypothesis, Russian cancel culture was construed as an uncompromising moral conflict between the modern, decadent West and traditional Russian values. The authors argued that perceptions of cancel culture as a "natural" moral conflict between Russian and Western values are encouraged by state propaganda, highlighting the adaptability of cancellation rhetoric to existing political discourses.

4 Josh Compton and Daniel Lam (Dartmouth College) contended that the analogic names given to the inoculation theory and character assassination are doing a lot of work.

They proposed that a broader view of the targets and or bases in the analogics of both reveal connections that not only keep the analogic consistent, but additionally, lead to more cohesive programs of study in the respective areas. Regarding inoculation theory—the classic theory of resistance to influence that shows how attitudes and beliefs can be made resistant to persuasion through pre-exposure to weakened versions of persuasion—its analogic namesake has been referenced as the theory’s foundation, as a guide for inoculation research, and as the theory’s core explanatory. Regarding character assassination—the rhetorical practice of derogating someone or something—the term carries strong connotative and denotative meanings, characterizing such rhetorical acts as particularly destructive—potentially a final, irreparable action. The analogy embedded in the name character assassination, then, helps to explain the overall concept of these communication phenomena, and additionally, helps to explain specific forms of character assassination. And yet, analogies can also be confounding when used to name theories. Scholars working with both theories have cautioned taking the analogies too literally. Compton and Lam argue that both theoretical constructs can benefit from the strengths and grow from the limitations of each analogy. That is, the same qualities that make analogies helpful explanatories for each theory, respectively, continue when considering the two theories together. Additionally, considering the limitations of the analogies with each theory raises some interesting concerns—and opportunities—that cross both theories, collectively.

PANEL 6

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Character assassination (CA) and canceling are weaponized by attackers in international relations to achieve diverse strategic goals. Russian heads of state use CA against foreign leaders: during crises in relations, after revolutions or coups, to weaken anti-Russian candidates in foreign elections, and to weaken elected officials who engage in criticism of or unfriendly actions towards Russia. During the Gulf Crisis of 2017, Doha's CA strategy focused on isolating targets by silencing their allies, creating distrust, and weaponizing instincts of self preservation, while continuing waves of direct attacks at opportune moments. In the Greek political context, "China bashing" is used to express domestic concerns regarding aggressive entrepreneurial practices, deterioration of employment conditions, and the perceived risk of perishing national assets and negative consequences for the domestic national economy. Some global powers utilize the rhetoric of international sanctions to drive their foreign policy interests by balancing the power of countries that violate international law. State character assassins can also use the rhetoric of cancellation to construct themselves as rational actors while demonizing their enemies. However, such strategies risk conditioning "rogue" countries to act in ways that threaten world peace.

Ekaterina Egorova (Political Profiler, U.S.) explored how character assassination is used as a tool of information warfare in international relations.

In international politics, information warfare, media relations, and psyops (psychological operations) are used alongside diplomacy, military, and economic strategies to achieve national foreign policy objectives. CA uses deception and influence to achieve three primary objectives: to weaken ties between foreign leaders and the domestic population, to reduce his or her international support, and to lower the rival leader's status in the international hierarchy. Focusing on the Russian context, Egorova identifies several situations in which Russian heads of state use CA against foreign leaders: during crises in relations, after revolutions or coups, to weaken anti-Russian candidates in foreign elections, and to weaken elected officials who engage in criticism of or unfriendly actions towards Russia. Some examples included Russian CA against French president Emmanuel Macron and U.S. president Joseph Biden, as "multi-step plays" revolving around core themes, such as the targets' weakness, femininity, and psychopathy. In the Russian media, CA attempts are frequently bolstered with "expert" opinion from psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as comic attacks from late night talk show hosts. Still, the weaknesses of many CA techniques, including false information, deception, insults, ad hominem attacks, health and personality allegations, are shown in their projection of the assassins' personal prejudices on a foreign audience.

2 Athina Limnioudi and Athanassios N. Samaras (University of Piraeus, Greece) examined the intersection of cancel culture and “China bashing” in the Greek political context.

The scholars explored the compatibility among the nation-bashing, cancel culture, and consumer animosity theoretical frameworks by analyzing a controversy over Chinese belt-and-road investment in the Greek economy. Both phenomena involve specific behavioral reactions to negative events, especially violations of social norms or perceived unethical behavior. In the case of foreign investments, domestic concerns center around aggressive entrepreneurial practices, deterioration of employment conditions, and the perceived risk of perishing national assets and negative consequences for the domestic national economy. Limnioudi and Samaras applied an integrated tool box to the analysis of direct foreign investments to examine the interplay of country image and company image, or how the image formulation of a foreign nation is mediated by the operation of a dominant company (in this case, the state-owned shipping company Cosco).

3 Irina Tsukerman (Independent Scholar, U.S.) discussed the use of character assassination (CA) and information warfare in international relations, focusing on the patterns and the effect of cancel culture in the political discourse aspect of international relations.

In response to the deterioration of relations with KSA, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain in 2017, Doha embarked on a media campaign that began with costly lobbying efforts and character assassination of rival leaders in cyberspace and in the press. As the conflict unfolded, these CA efforts expanded and took on new dimensions, eventually taking down secondary and tertiary victims increasingly distanced from the campaigns' initial targets. Tsukerman details how these developments were masked and justified in "positive" reasoning as efforts to protect audiences from "bad" actors, as well as how CA was used to build the character assassins' reputations and images of the character assassins. Doha's CA strategy isolated its targets by silencing their allies, creating distrust, and weaponizing instincts of self preservation, while the attackers unleashed waves of direct attacks at opportune moments. These strategies created multiple pressure points on their primary targets, who could no longer utilize previously reliable allies for assistance to speak out in the media, confront threats, or push back against negative public opinion. What began as a limited conflict among a narrow set of actors became a "total war of cancellation." In such campaigns, entire societies become inadvertent tools of foreign policy, often without even realizing how they are being used and by whom.

4 Divine Narkotey Aboagye (University of Maryland, College Park) analyzed the Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" towards "rogue" countries who transgress international nuclear non-proliferation treaties as a manifestation of cancel culture in the U.S. foreign policy.

Aboagye discussed how global powers like the United States utilize the rhetoric of international sanctions to drive their foreign policy interests by balancing the power of countries that violate international law. In a case study from 2017, President Donald Trump issued an Executive Order mandating that the Treasury Department prohibit U.S. financial institutions from doing business with North Korea, while Steven Mnuchin issued a statement cautioning foreign financial organizations against doing business with the nation. The U.S. leveled similar sanctions on Iran after pulling out of the JCPOA nuclear deal. Aboagye argued that by canceling other countries, the U.S. constructs itself as a rational actor while demonizing hostile leaders. In addition, international sanctions also condition "rogue" countries to develop inoculation strategies, thereby acting in ways that threaten world peace. Aboagye advocated the use of negotiation and peace talks as a viable alternative to the escalatory rhetoric of international sanctions.

PANEL 7 **CANCEL CULTURE, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS**

The opponents of social and political movements increasingly employ the rhetoric of cancel culture to mock and belittle their enemies. However, such attacks risk creating a “boomerang” effect that galvanizes and unites their targets’ supporters. In the Indian context, elite attacks on Punjabi farmers protesting controversial reform acts empowered, united, and expanded the farmers’ movement, which evolved into a broad-based coalition distinguished by its discipline and solidarity. Political entertainment, which targets political character, has increasingly become a source of political information. There are significant gaps in the information that political humor contributed to the public discourse. These gaps reflect the limitations of political humor and entertainment as an educational medium.

Stephen J. Farnsworth (University of Mary Washington), S. Robert Lichter (George Mason University), Farah Latif (George Mason University), Kate Seltzer (University of Mary Washington) and Sally Burkley (University of Mary Washington) examined political humor during the 2020 U.S. presidential elections.

Building on previous research on late-night political humor and its impact on viewers, the authors conducted content analyses of four nightly entertainers (Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, and Trevor Noah) and three influential once-a-week comedy programs (Saturday Night Live, Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, and Last Week Tonight). Key subjects for mockery included President Donald Trump’s patterns of deceit, his perceived mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fallout from his impeachment, as well as Trump’s personal mannerisms and behavior. However, the authors identified significant gaps in the information that political humor contributed to the public discourse, as late night comics continued to attack Donald Trump while focusing very little attention on Joe Biden. These gaps reflect the limitations of political humor and entertainment as an educational medium and are particularly concerning as citizens increasingly employ political humor and entertainment as a source of political information.

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Kanwalpreet Baidwan (Punjab University, India) explored how cancellation tactics create boomerang effects that ultimately strengthen their targets.

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the Government of India (GOI) passed three farm acts with the aim to reform the Indian agricultural sector. Resistance to the farm acts united 31 factions of farmers, who marched to the outskirts of Delhi to lobby the government to listen to their grievances and treat them as equal stakeholders. In response to the farmer's movement, members of the media and the GOI called the farmers anti-nationalists. These derogatory remarks mobilized farmers from other parts of India to march to Delhi to support the Punjabi farmers' cause, creating a people's movement composed of individuals from many different social strata. The attacks from GOI and the Indian media, enabled the creation of a broad-based coalition distinguished by meticulous management and discipline and a communal color. Thus, the consequences of negative rhetoric during the farmers' protests illustrate how authorities employ the tactics of cancel culture to muzzle democratic dissent, as well as ways such negative tactics empower and unite social movements.

PANEL 8 CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AND CANCEL CULTURE IN HISTORY

Echoing Icks' conclusion in Panel 1, the panelists traced the roots of character assassination (CA) and cancel culture back to the ancient world. Disguised as a philosophical and historical tract, Philo of Alexandria's "The Embassy to Gaius" used the five pillars of the CA theoretical model (attacker, target, media, audience, and context) to spearhead the highly successful CA of Roman emperor Gaius Caligula. However, to further the study of cancel culture in history, examples of proto-cancel culture (such as the exile of Julia, the Roman emperor Augustus' beloved first daughter), must be distinguished from other ancient practices like ostracism, exile, censorship, iconoclasm or damnatio memoriae. In the American context, survey research reveals that attitudes towards CA attempts are mediated by political affiliation, highlighting the impact of sociocultural context on the success of CA and cancellation campaigns.

Florian Krüpe (Marburg University, Germany) argued that the exile of Julia, the daughter of the first Roman emperor Augustus, was not merely a banishment; instead, it was a form of cancellation akin to a long wait for death.

At first glance, Julia's fate is surprising given her dynastically essential position within the Julian family. In historical research, her fall is either attributed to a real moral transgression (adultery) or the concealment and "erotic disavowal" of a political incident, possibly a coup d'état, in which she and members of her circle were exiled and even sentenced to death as supposed or alleged conspirators. Krüpe claimed that the generational conflict between Julia and her father Augustus, the "scandal" and the historiographical character attacks on her, and the modern literary and cineastic attempts to redeem her are all elements of the cancellation of Augustus' beloved first daughter, who had been so essential to his dynastic plans. To further the study of cancel culture in history, Krüpe presented a typology to distinguish examples of proto-cancel culture like the exile of Julia from other ancient practices like ostracism, exile, censorship, iconoclasm or damnatio memoriae.

2 Henri van Nispen (Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands) discussed the highly successful character assassination of Roman emperor Gaius Caligula spearheaded by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15/10 - ca. 45/50).

Shocked by Caligula's intention to have a statue of himself placed in the Temple in Jerusalem, Philo depicted the emperor as a Jew-hating megalomaniac who thought himself divine. Philo's fierce attack, disguised as a philosophical and historical tract, illustrates how an ancient author used his writings for character assassination. Van Nispen also explored how the five pillars of the theoretical model of character assassination (attacker, target, media, audience, and context) are visible in Philo's book "The Embassy to Gaius."

3 Tyler Johnson (The University of Oklahoma) used original survey research to answer questions about Americans' attitudes towards memorials to Confederate general Robert E. Lee, including the motivations behind their opinions and what types of information may change their minds.

A 2019 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that over 1700 public symbols of the Confederacy exist across America. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, over 100 such memorials were removed, while others became the topic of heated debate. Survey research shows that the American public is closely divided on whether these symbols should be moved, removed, or stay where they are. However, very little is known about what motivates their opinions and what types of arguments may change their minds. Using a set of original survey experiments, Johnson examined whether the presentation of biographical and historical information about Confederates and slavery has the power to shape how individuals feel about removing Confederate monument. Experimental results revealed a significant relationship between information on Lee's personal views on slavery and support for multiple removal situations, while general biographical information on Lee and information on slavery itself was less influential. Data collected both before and after the Black Lives Movement protests of summer 2020 revealed that conservative ideology and approval of former president Donald Trump were more likely to predict anti-removal attitudes in 2020 than 2019, demonstrating how political partisanship mediates public attitudes. Johnson argued that these findings have implications for the study of modern attitudes toward American history and the civil war, for learning about the power of biography and reputation in American public opinion, for efforts being undertaken by groups fighting over such symbols, and for the contemporary debate over so-called "cancel culture."

CONTRIBUTORS



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