

What's wrong with cancel culture?

A suggested agenda for the signers of the open letter to *Harper's* on free speech

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

July 17, 2020

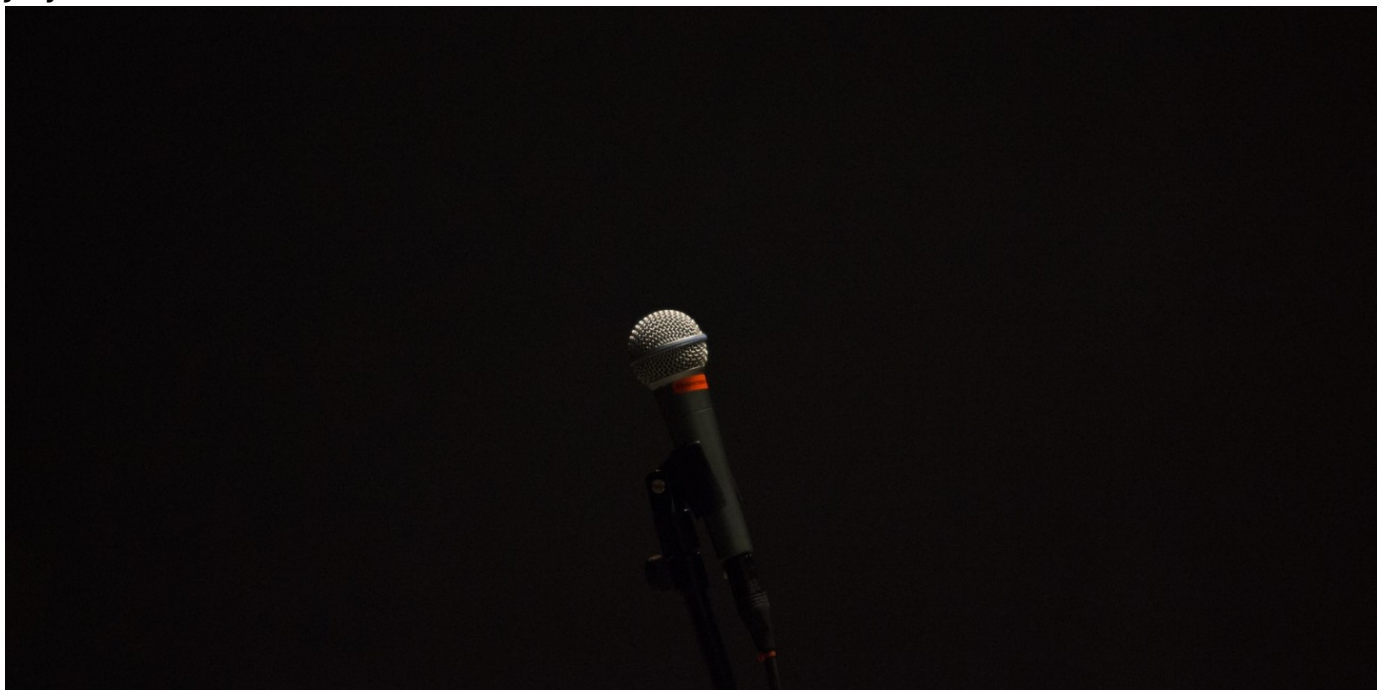


Photo by Daniel Sandvik on Unsplash

As an uncontrolled pandemic rages, a national movement demands police reform, and a looming withdrawal of unemployment benefits threatens to create an instant housing and nutrition crisis, a significant segment of the media world has paused to sound the alarm about cancellations.

Cancel culture—a concept flexible enough to cover almost any negative consequence for disfavored words or actions—mostly functions as shorthand for the repercussions of violating taboos on race and gender in predominantly liberal cultural institutions. It is a nightly topic on Fox News, where statutory and university personnel decisions overshadow coverage of a viral outbreak infecting tens of thousands of Americans each day. (This has been especially true of Tucker Carlson’s

highly-rated show, although [Fox ended up cancelling Carlson's head writer](#) over flagrantly bigoted posts in an online forum.)

But concern over cancel culture isn't confined to conservative media. In an [open letter](#) published by Harper's on July 7, a long list of journalists, artists, and scholars (whose politics mostly range from the center to the left) warned that the "free exchange of ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted." This "intolerance of opposing views," "vogue for public shaming and ostracism," and "tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty," has migrated from the "radical right" to the mainstream, where it expresses itself in "panicked damage control" by employers and publishers. To address this cultural problem, these masthead grandees offer nothing much beyond an appeal to tolerance, experimentation, and risk.

We can do better.

The instances cited in the Harper's letter can be recognized from vague descriptions. A UCLA lecturer was [investigated for reading from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," including King's citation of a racial slur](#). A researcher for an analytics firm was [fired after tweeting the results](#) of a paper comparing voters' responses to riots and to nonviolent civil rights efforts in the 1960s. The novel *American Dirt* was [strongly criticized](#) for its white author's depiction of a Mexican family's journey to the US border. A New York Times editor who approved an op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton calling for military deployment to cities experiencing violence along with antiracism protests ["stepped down" amid backlash](#) from Times subscribers and employees (the latter of whom had already been directed, in a rather censorious fashion, not to criticize the editorial page online). The justice of these decisions, especially by employers, is at best open to question.

But the label "cancel culture" has been lavishly applied to many different cases, from consumer boycotts to the lawful and deliberate removal of monuments to Confederate war criminals. At the same time, there have been many actions against speech and assembly that aren't being called "cancellations."

The federal government cancelled a peaceful protest in front of the White House [with tear gas—to clear way](#) for a presidential photo-op. Many protesters have been cancelled, some fatally, by drivers (including law enforcement) deliberately speeding into them in [66 separate events this year](#). Police attacks against [protesters](#)—and

against [journalists](#) covering the protests—have been routine. Amazon warehouse workers have been fired in what is [alleged to be retaliation for speaking out](#) against workplace conditions during the coronavirus outbreak. Two lawsuits attempted to prevent the publication of books unflattering to the president. There is also the daily, relentless stream of harassment against people of color, women, and LGBTQ people online.

I doubt that most of those who signed the Harper's letter would endorse any of those cancellations. One of them did endorse [an anti-democratic coup in Bolivia](#) which, unsurprisingly, hasn't been great for [free speech](#) and [debate](#) there.

But this brings us to a problem with even the high-minded calls for free debate and cancellation-free public life. It's not that the earnest proponents of speech and debate are wrong; it's that they're right in too narrow a way.

While major universities and publications like the New York Times wield a disproportionate influence over our national conversations, they do not touch most Americans directly and they account for only a small share of the “speech,” “expression,” or “debate” we engage in. They are important to the people who write open letters and—if it needs to be said—to readers like me. We want our media consumption to be well-researched, vigorous, and challenging within a broad but never quite explicit set of parameters. (If the New York Times had published an op-ed by a senator saying “I love to hear the screams of immigrant children in cages,” fewer people would have objected to the editor's dismissal.)

But “free speech” and “open debate” are empty words if they only refer to curating the menu of opinions and stories offered by institutions and publications catering to a generally liberal intelligentsia.

We are not, in fact, a freer, more liberal, or less debate-constrained society if we can muse about military occupations on the editorial page while it is legal to fire workers for organizing, to violently attack and disperse protesters and journalists without consequence, to retaliate against whistleblowers, or to enforce silence through non-disclosure agreements and the abuse of government classification. No one should respect a doctrine of free speech that protects only certain professions and institutions while leaving government whistleblowers, McDonald's workers who suffer sexual harassment, or the whole nation of Bolivia to endure whatever the powerful may do to them.

Free speech and open debate can't exist merely in a zone of indulgence created by media owners and federal laws. Free speech for the capital becomes a sham if there is no free speech in the streets and workplaces of the provinces.

So I suggest that our aggrieved letter-writers and anxious liberals embrace an agenda for real free speech and open debate. Consider speech and debate not as entertainment for a bored and increasingly ineffective professional class, but as central acts of citizenship.

End at-will employment, so that no one can be fired for tweeting about a study or quoting Martin Luther King Jr. Make protections for workplace speech and labor organizing stronger, so that no one can be fired for pointing out that they are being made to work in dangerous or degrading circumstances. Make health insurance and basic income universal, so that no one has to worry about impoverishing themselves or their families for saying something unpopular. Make it enforceably illegal to use tear gas and ramming attacks on nonviolent protesters, and hold violators to account. Make more NDAs unenforceable, restrict the use of classification, and require tech platforms to get serious about curtailing harassment.

None of this will stop boycotts or online outrage or controversy voiced and prosecuted in unpleasant and unfair ways. But all of it is achievable, and all of it will do more to protect controversial people and opinions than any number of earnest appeals to tolerance. A real free-speech agenda will help more people practice their citizenship with less fear. A commitment to free and open debate requires not just personal tolerance for opposing views but real economic solidarity with people whose words we will never read in any op-ed.