

CASE #14: EXPLORING CANCEL CULTURE

The Big Picture

Cancel culture has become a defining feature of modern society. It refers to the public denouncement, boycott, or social ostracism of individuals or organizations believed to have acted in an offensive or harmful manner. Supporters view it as a tool for accountability, while critics warn that it stifles free speech, lacks due process, and often results in disproportionate consequences.

The ethical tension lies between freedom of expression and accountability for harm. This case examines two scenarios: an academic facing backlash over their research and a corporate leader navigating pressure to take a political stand—to consider fairness, proportionality, and consequences in the context of cancel culture.

Case Study 1: Dr. Alex Greene

Dr. Alex Greene, a respected scientist and former All-American swimmer, published research suggesting that transgender athletes may have advantages in women's sports. Although peer-reviewed, critics denounced the work as discriminatory. Social media backlash under the hashtag #CancelDrGreene led to calls for Greene's removal from professional associations and academic posts.

Key Dilemmas for Alex:

- Should Greene pursue and publish research when the findings are likely to provoke controversy?
- How should researchers weigh the pursuit of truth against potential social harm?
- Are there ethical boundaries on what topics should be studied, or must academic freedom always prevail?

Case Study 2: Casey Smith and Big Box Stores

Casey Smith, Chief Marketing Officer of Big Box Stores, faces pressure as South Carolina considers a controversial bill. Social media campaigns urge boycotts of companies that do not oppose the legislation, while company leadership has political ties supporting it.

Key Dilemmas for Casey:

- Should Casey recommend the company take a public stand on the legislation, remain neutral, or avoid involvement altogether?
- How should employee and customer opinions be factored into a corporate decision?
- Should Casey act on personal convictions if they conflict with the Board's direction?

Ethical Dimensions of Cancel Culture

- Freedom of Speech vs. Accountability: Supporters argue public backlash holds people responsible for harmful words or actions. Critics argue it silences unpopular views, discourages debate, and assumes 'wrongness' without clear standards.
- Proportionality and Fairness: The response to offensive behavior should match the severity of the act. Excessive backlash can inflict harm far beyond the offense.
- Rehabilitation and Education: Should cancel culture allow room for growth and change rather than permanent exclusion?
- Due Process and Investigation: Cancel culture often lacks formal review or a chance to respond. Social media judgments can move faster than facts.

Questions for Discussion

1. When does free speech cross into harmful speech that justifies cancellation? Who decides?
2. How can proportionality be maintained when addressing offensive behavior?
3. Should individuals or organizations be offered a path to rehabilitation instead of permanent exclusion?
4. How can due process or fair review be applied in an era of instant online judgment?
5. Should businesses take public stands on political or social issues, or focus solely on their core mission?
6. How can society distinguish between holding people accountable and silencing unpopular views?

Closing Reflection

"We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty."

—Edward R. Murrow